

IZUSHIRO
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THE GREAT MAGICMASTER'S

RETIREMENT PLAN

14





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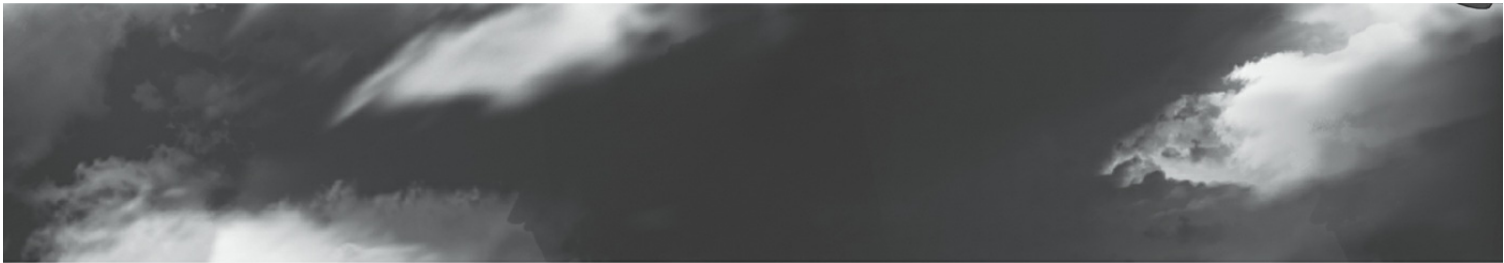
THE GREATEST MAGIC MASTER'S

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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan

C O N T E N T S

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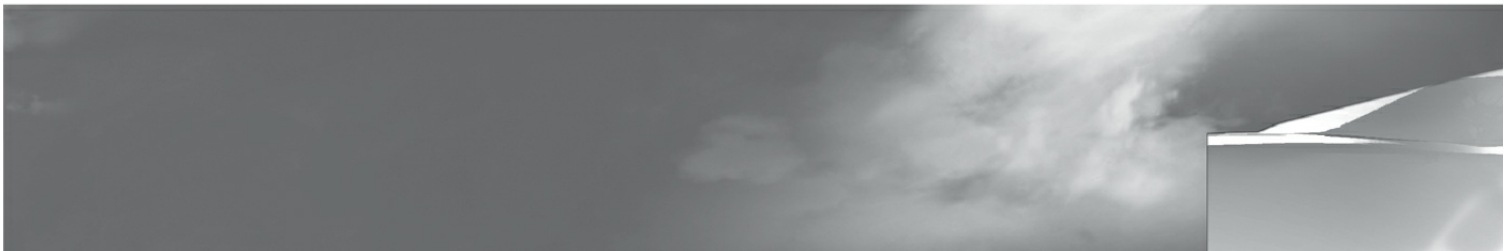
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Seventy-Seventh Chapter

A Contradictory Person from the Sturdy Nation

Alpha's neighboring country, Clevideet, boasted the highest defensive capabilities of the seven nations. The Sturdy Nation received its name thanks to its unique military structure and excellently functioning magic barrier. But the biggest factor was a certain Single Digit Magicmaster.

No matter the scale of an invasion, the Fiends would never be able to breach the final defensive lines established some two kilometers away from the outermost military base—not as long as Clevideet had the ranked No. 4 “Hardest Magicmaster,” Fanon Trooper.

In terms of defense, she was just as good as No. 1 and No. 2, earning her the respect and awe of people within and outside the nation. However, while she was powerful, she had certain quirks, especially when it came to awe.

In her nation, she was cared for possibly more than even the ruler and treated as a godsend. In the military headquarters, it was routine for people to carefully select their words when talking about her, so as to not touch upon a certain absolute taboo. Therefore, the nation's upper echelons had become better at rhetorical flourishes and flattery than any other nation's military, because the social graciousness was necessary in order to get along with her.

Known to have a fondness for women, she looked at men as nothing more than trash. She would severely punish any careless misstep that ruined her mood. This combined to put the male military personnel constantly on edge. They would only speak in a purely formal tone when she was concerned. And no matter how lukewarm a response they received from her, they would gratefully accept it and back down.

That was how much power Fanon Trooper had in Clevideet. She was a ruler and a tyrant at the same time.

Thus, a strangely excited and clear voice rang out from inside a boutique on

the lively main street of one of Clevideet's largest cities.

"Lady Fanon! We thank you very much for your continued patronage of this store!" The female shopkeeper of the boutique rubbed her hands together and flattered the Magicmaster. "Of course, we have everything you might desire, Lady Fanon!"

The staff lined up by the shopkeeper, looking nervous. They were all gathered to entertain their distinguished customer. While it wasn't the first time Fanon had come to the boutique, neither the shopkeeper nor the employees could get used to her visits.

It wasn't just because she was a renowned Single Digit. There was a rumor that if she took a liking to a place, it would prosper to the point of being able to open several branch stores, but if she left without even buying a pair of underwear, the store would see a dramatic drop in customers for a while. It might have been just a rumor, but they couldn't very well ignore it.

Recently, Fanon had visited a newly opened rival boutique across the street and left without carrying a single bag...and now it was vacant of customers and set to close down for good before long. So the female shopkeeper wiped the sweat from the nape of her neck and gave Fanon an amiable smile while signaling her employees with her eyes.

"We welcome you! The entire staff is at your every beck and call!"

The shopkeeper spoke in an excited tone but only received a languid response.

"Hmm, well, fine. I don't really like being pushed around in this kind of boutique." The unconcerned voice came from Fanon Trooper herself. Given her reputation, she was surprisingly petite and youthful.

Despite the clear weather, she walked around with a cute umbrella. Her clothes were very girlish, with frills and various accessories. Based on the rather high heels she stood unsteadily on, she was pretty self-conscious about her height. Of course, that was taboo, and they could never mention it.

The shopkeeper urged her staff to check on their inventory while she faced the difficult customer. Using the skills she had honed over her many years of

customer service, she casually ran her eyes over Fanon to see what she was wearing today. She didn't neglect to note the fickle customer's facial expression and gestures.

"Oh heavens, not at all. This is a first-rate boutique, and we would never push around a customer! 'Customer first' is our motto! In fact, all of today's staff are certified coordinators as well. I hope they can be of help to you, Lady Fanon..."

"Hmm, I don't care about that. And I never ordered any coordination either."

"L-Lady Fanon?" the shopkeeper asked after a pause. "No, uhm... Right! There are several people accompanying you today. Perhaps we might be able to find clothing for them as well! They are all very beautiful! Lady Fanon truly is like a goddess surrounded by beautiful fairies!"

Normally Fanon came alone or at most with one person to carry her luggage. But today she had five subordinates with her. They were all tall, beautiful women that Fanon must have taken a liking to.

The shopkeeper's flattery, though obvious, pulled at Fanon's heartstrings to some degree, and she flashed a smile. "You can tell? They're all in my squad. But because they're all military, they lack proper fashion sense. So why don't you use your skills to bring out their appeal? You can even dress them up if you like. We will be going around town after this. Can I leave it to you?"

"Y-Yes! Of course!" the shopkeeper answered in a shrill voice.

Inside, she was screaming, *L-Lady Fanon's women squad!!! And five of them! This is bad, very bad! We will need to service them perfectly! Any slipup could lead to five times the anger! If that happens, I will lose my head, no doubt! Everyone, please, I beg you to consider this day to be the reason you were born and serve them with all of your being!*

The shopkeeper pleaded with her staff with her eyes, and they all nodded with a sparkle in theirs. They attended to Fanon's subordinates, wielding their flawless business smiles as they stepped onto the battlefield that would decide their fate.

The female shopkeeper saw them off and faced Fanon. *In any case, gathering a wide range of products was the right decision*, she thought.

Fanon's tastes were rather different from the norm. First, she preferred clothes made with lace and frills that had an overall cute feel to them. However, she also tended to long for more mature clothing and wanted high heels to make up for her height. And from what the shopkeeper could see from Fanon's clothes, her preference in colors had changed.

I see, so this is what her favorite colors are like now. The female shopkeeper made a mental note as she ran through the store's inventory in her mind.

Based on the Magicmaster's hobbies, she probably wouldn't like coats or cardigans, but considering her height, longer tight pants were out of the question.

I more or less have a grasp of Lady Fanon's hobbies and preferences. I even created an original brand just for her using the data I collected last time! There are no holes in my plans! the female shopkeeper thought, convinced of her coming victory.

However, in the next moment, Fanon's eyes stopped on a display item.

"Oh, is this a new shirt?"

The female shopkeeper looked over at the item and felt like screaming.

What?! How?! She would never show any interest in that normally! The one next to it is all frilly and cutesy, the perfect kind of one-piece dress Lady Fanon likes! Ah?! Even now, she's pretending to look at the new outfits while glancing at the dress. As I thought, that's what she prefers! So why? the shopkeeper thought.

Perhaps it's because she has her subordinates with her today! In that case, she must want to preserve her dignity as captain! She wants to show she doesn't just like cute clothes but also has an eye on the latest fashion, wielding a wide range of knowledge and interests! I'm sure that's it! The shopkeeper was now ashamed of shallowly thinking Fanon only had a single preference. In the end, she learned that she still had a long way to go.

Fanon paused before responding, "Yes, perhaps I should try it out."

Aaahhhh! Another trial!

The shopkeeper was astonished by Fanon's whims and a crack appeared in her business smile. Meanwhile, the rest of the staff were amiably chatting with Fanon's subordinates.

The shopkeeper had already prepared clothes for Fanon, but this boutique's main demographic was women in search of stylish clothes, so obviously the clothing line would suit them since they all had the tall, slender bodies of models.

However, in this situation, there was such a thing as suiting them too well. What would happen if Fanon were to try on the shopkeeper's recommendation in this crowd of beauties? She would almost certainly compare herself to them.

That would only make her difference in height and figure all the more obvious. Fanon was much smaller than the rest of the squad members she had brought with her. The shopkeeper could tell that if she lined up next to the more adult women, Fanon would look like a child dressing up to look older.

What do I do?! If Lady Fanon gets upset at something that has nothing to do with us, there will be nothing we can do! she thought.

This boutique catered to primarily adult women. But if that focus put Fanon in a foul mood, it would be disastrous. So the shopkeeper resolved to abandon the boutique's personality and focus on pleasing Fanon.

Then I should choose something that suits her, at least... Ah, no! I couldn't possibly recommend the slim slacks that would go well with that shirt to Lady Fanon! How could I alter the length in front of her? Pointing out her short legs would be suicidal!

As the shopkeeper desperately racked her brain, an overly familiar and carefree voice filled the boutique. "Ah, Lady Fanon, heya. You shopping today too? We filled our stock recently, so please go ahead. Oh? Lady Fanon, that shirt's no good. It wouldn't suit you at all."

Shocked, the shopkeeper spun in the direction of the voice, her bloodshot eyes opening wide.

Why... Why is she here?!

Having sensed the shopkeeper's hesitation, a female staff member with light-

brown hair and small, gold earrings had walked over to Fanon and gotten strangely close. She was someone to watch out for, which was exactly why the shopkeeper had immediately sent her home when Fanon arrived.

She was a treacherous friend among experts. She was close to Fanon at twenty-one years old, but her overly familiar attitude was out of the question. And she'd immediately dropped a bomb by saying something wouldn't suit Fanon.

"L-Lady Fanon? Th-This person is..." The shopkeeper's voice trembled as she attempted to make excuses. "But before that...! You!" The shopkeeper managed to keep a smile on her face as she briskly walked over to position herself between Fanon and the new employee. For the sake of her staff and her shop's future, this rude newcomer needed to be stopped at all costs.

However, Fanon's reaction wasn't as cutting as she had expected.

"Hmm, you're right," she said. "I actually thought so too. Well, it is new so I should at least check it out."

"That's Lady Fanon for you!" the newcomer blithely interjected.

And that was when Fanon noticed her clothes.

"By the way, those clothes... Aren't you supposed to be off today?"

"Well, I wrapped up early today," the newcomer said, "but I had to be ready to serve if you, Lady Fanon, were visiting!"

"No, no, no! A-As the shopkeeper, I will see to this personally!" In a flurry, the female shopkeeper recommended herself, but Fanon entrusted herself to the newcomer instead.

The shopkeeper bit her lip.

Now that it had come to this, it was too late. Digging in any further would only upset Fanon.

She had no other choice, but she gave the newcomer a stare that said, "Do it properly."

The newcomer only looked confused, causing the shopkeeper's shoulders to drop. Her face now as pale as a corpse, she seemed resigned to giving up. She'd

been perfectly prepared to greet Fanon, yet in the end she'd been blown up by friendly fire...

But there was a flicker of hope.

No, she is still part of our staff and she's gone through our training. She might be a bit of an airhead with some quirks, but it's fine! She'll manage somehow. With this desperate thought, she looked at Fanon and the new staff member.

"Oh, Lady Fanon, I think you should get something that shows your shoulders. You don't want to be considered childish right?" asked the staff member.

Bad topic!

Despite the shopkeeper's heavy expectations, the newcomer had casually betrayed them in an instant. However, Fanon didn't seem to particularly mind.

"Well, it would be similar to my battle uniform, so it's not like I hate it. But that pile is just the things that are left unsold, isn't it?" she asked.

Indeed, the clothes that had been recommended to Fanon were from the original brand made just for her. Their style and even the material used was overall very cutesy and not very suitable for everyday wear. As such, they didn't sell well, especially at a high-class boutique like this one where they couldn't display more items than necessary like a bargain sale at a cheaper store.

Yet who had lined up so many of them? They were arranged by size, but there were still just too many. Anyone would think they had been left over.

Normally, only a few pairs would be left out where customers could see them, and if necessary, a different size could be brought out from the back of the store. In fact, a good trick to use in sales was to say that they'd been mostly sold out and only this size was left. But that was not what the newcomer said.

Instead, the newcomer firmly made a declaration. "Well, they haven't sold well. Frankly, most people let the clothes wear them. But I'm sure you would be able to pull them off, Lady Fanon! Sometimes a bold attack can be just as good as a perfect defense!"

The shopkeeper could feel her cheeks twitch at the baseless claim.

"Really?" asked Fanon. "Hmm, then I'll take all of them."

The shopkeeper didn't think it was the newcomer's assertions that did the trick, but she could see a glint in Fanon's eyes.

"Will size S do? I think you should get them in size M too. I'm sure you will grow bigger in no time at all."

Yet another explosive statement from her staff member made a panicky chill run down the shopkeeper's spine. The newcomer had used a typical phrase said to customers going through their growth spurts, but surely that was a blunder.

Fanon was no child in her early teens. Considering her age, she should be long past her growth spurt, and treating her like a child was extremely rude. But Fanon reacted in a completely unexpected manner again.

"You're right. Then I'll take every size M you have too!"

"Thanks for the purchase!" said the new staff member.

"I think I want this hat too, but it doesn't suit me, does it?" Fanon longingly stared at the wide-brimmed hat on the display stand beside her. It was a beautiful hat with a white ribbon, but because of the wide brim, it would look too large on the small woman. And it was something difficult to pull off, especially for one who was considered more cute than beautiful. However, she liked the high-class and mature appearance of the hat.

Mmm... The shopkeeper groaned in her mind at the sight.

From a service point of view, this was an incredibly difficult situation to handle. The best option would be to affirm their customers' desires while guiding them towards a better alternative. The worst was to let them buy it to make them feel better. Doing so was against the shopkeeper's policy.

What now, newcomer? How will you respond to this?! The shopkeeper held her breath as she waited to see what the saleswoman would do next.

"Ah, no worries. It'll fit you perfectly, Lady Fanon! It'll look super cute on you!"

"Can I try it on?" asked Fanon.

That's awfully frivolous! How will this turn out?! The shopkeeper could barely hide the horrified look on her face as she immediately started to make a plan to

patch things up.

She couldn't afford to let Fanon's excitement wane. With the boutique's pride on the line, she would have to bring out a special gift from the back of the store. But would she make it...? Fanon would walk in front of a mirror any moment now. She had to hope the newcomer would buy time until then.



Completely unaware of her boss's distress, the newcomer casually spoke with Fanon. "Course! Oh, but before that, put this on over your clothes."

Draping what she was given over her shoulders, Fanon headed over to the full-length mirror.

Ah, buy some more time! Hey! Why are you pushing her towards the mirror even faster?! The shopkeeper panicked as Fanon walked to the mirror.

But when Fanon saw herself, she blushed in excitement. After posing for a while, she spun around.

Huh... the female shopkeeper thought.

Surprisingly, Fanon seemed even more excited than before. She had a reputation for being hard to please, so seeing her play in front of the mirror like a child caused the shopkeeper to cover her mouth and hold back her tears.

Woooooow! It's a complete victory! That newcomer might have some quirks, but she did some fine work! As expected from somebody I've seen potential in! If I ever start up another branch, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to let her manage it!

Her joy was understandable. After all, Fanon was a big customer. Not only did she purchase large amounts, this time she'd even brought some subordinates with her. The profits from today might equal a normal month's sales, and the additional publicity could be even more profitable.

"Oh, your recommendation is a pretty good combination. I'll take this too," said Fanon.

"Gotcha! Want us to send it to your home?"

"No, I'll bring it back myself. That's why we're here in such large numbers. Besides, coming out carrying so many bags really brings out that shopping feeling."

"I can get that. I hope today will be a wonderful weekend for you, Lady Fanon. Ah, but your companions look like this is the first time they've heard of it." The newcomer pointed at a woman with light-gold hair, who was standing with her arms folded and her lips pursed.

She spoke sternly. “Just so you know, I am your second-in-command and not your pack mule, Lady Fanon. Not to mention that I always wear work clothes when going out, so I don’t need to buy anything.”

The woman furrowed her brows and sighed, but she had the kind of features that made any gesture look picturesque. She had long legs, a slim waist, and moderately full breasts. She was a first-class beauty, and even the shopkeeper, with her discerning eye, couldn’t help but be impressed.

Even the eyes she was glaring at Fanon with were striking. By her own words, she was a subordinate, but despite that, the shopkeeper saw the longing in Fanon’s eyes as she stared at her. Fanon’s interest in adult fashion probably stemmed from wanting to become like that woman.

However, it was quite literally too high of an expectation, considering their difference in height. The shopkeeper looked down at Fanon’s feet and saw the high heels that were evidence of the girl trying to make herself look taller. Unaware of the shopkeeper’s glance, Fanon sulked.

“Exceles, you need to expand your personal wardrobe!”

Exceles, Fanon’s second-in-command, looked a little troubled and answered in a quiet voice, “No, please don’t concern yourself with that. Besides, should you really be dragging your subordinates around to go shopping? When it comes to clothes and appearance, even the slightest thing can ruin your mood, Lady Fanon. Did you already forget how you went on a rampage because you couldn’t find a bra in your size at a lingerie store?”

The last bit had been in a whisper, but it had reached the ears of everyone in the boutique.

Frankly, anything related to Fanon’s bust size was a complete taboo in these circles. In fact, Fanon had quite significantly padded her modest chest today, and all of the staff were a little bothered by the slightly unbalanced and unnatural look.

“You’re not supposed to mention that!” said Fanon.

“Ah, excuse me. However, the other squad members are looking this way,” responded Exceles.

“Fine! Besides, I’m not that intolerant!”

“Then I expect you will not get upset on our way back,” Exceles said emphatically to Fanon.

Whenever Fanon went around to shop for clothing with her subordinates, they would always return with new jackets and coats, as well as slacks that made their legs look even longer. And Fanon would notice them walking with great confidence.

On top of that, they would wear sunglasses or shawls, making them look even more like models. Of course, this only made Fanon’s own fashion stand out. As a result, it was common for Fanon to get upset on the way home from a fulfilling shopping spree. That was what Exceles was worried about.

With Fanon’s attention shifted away from shopping, the shopkeeper saw her chance and stepped between the three. “May I have a moment?”

The special item from the back of the store had finally arrived. It was an eye-catcher that she’d stocked up on just for Fanon.

“I took the liberty of ordering this item because I felt that it would suit you very well, Lady Fanon. It is, of course, a limited edition. How about it? Doesn’t it feel wonderful to touch! No costs were spared for the fabric, and it’s something you won’t find anywhere else.”

Giving a trained sales pitch, the shopkeeper held out some luxurious clothes in front of Fanon. She sensed the newcomer who had hit it off with Fanon staring at her.

What are you looking at me like that for? she thought. I’m the shopkeeper. You are just staff! That’s why we should work together to...ah, it’s hopeless. She has no intention of selling this with me. Read the room, will you?!

Giving up the idea of any support, the shopkeeper began to advertise her product. She unfolded somewhat transparent clothes made of thin silk.

“This is a fantastic negligee that guarantees the best comfort when sleeping. Since it’s private in nature, you, of course, want the very best clothes in the bedroom. This is a quality for an adult lady. And this is the finest fabric you could—”

“Isn’t that indecent? No thanks,” said Fanon.

“Ah, yes, I see...”

Sure, it was pretty transparent, but the shopkeeper had thought Fanon would love it since she looked up to more adult styles.

The shopkeeper’s shoulders slumped as the newcomer interjected, “What? So that wasn’t your own stash?”

“Of course not!” said the shopkeeper.

Things looked like they could end poorly a few times, sending chills down the spines of all of the staff, but Fanon and her subordinates left the boutique satisfied. The shop, of course, saw record-high sales that day.

The city was sensitive to trends, and word of Fanon’s visit would no doubt spread by tomorrow, which meant that customers would be coming in droves for days.

But it meant more work for the staff. Next, they would put in overtime to dress the mannequins with the clothes that Fanon and her company had purchased. But it was made possible because of the staff’s hard work.

In fact, it had all worked out well because of that newcomer. She had seemed to understand Fanon’s thoughts, and the shopkeeper knew it would probably be better to have her working at the main boutique than at a branch, in case Fanon visited again.

The newcomer was completely unaware that she had missed her chance at a promotion and clocked out in a happy mood. She was permitted to skip the overtime thanks to her efforts. The sudden storm had passed the high-class boutique and left it safe.

It was less calm in Fanon’s party.

“Lady Fanon, even if you don’t make me carry it, isn’t it the same if you have everyone else do it? Shouldn’t you just have let the store deliver it to your house?” Exceles asked.

Exceles felt bad for the other squad members, but Fanon refuted her.

“What are you saying? It’s great recreation to deepen the bonds of the squad.

Besides, I'm paying for everything today, and you're all having fun, aren't you?" asked Fanon.

"Yes, well, that is a problem too..."

Like Fanon said, nobody was complaining. In fact, they had offered to carry the luggage because they idolized Fanon—they were practically Fanon believers.

Exceles was obviously not pleased, but one of the squad members cheerfully spoke to her. "It's just as Lady Fanon says. So why not forget your position for today and enjoy yourself! Besides, we are happy just to learn of Lady Fanon's daily life, and it is an honor to accompany her. Not to mention, it isn't often we can speak between just us women in the military. This is all thanks to Lady Fanon's thoughtfulness!"

"You're always spoiling Lady Fanon like that," Exceles said, looking troubled.

But the other woman smiled broadly. "She even bought so much for us."

So that's what it is, Exceles thought and put her hand on her forehead. It was no different from being bribed. It wasn't like the squad members treating Fanon like a princess was a new occurrence, but lately they were going too far.

As members of the military, there were usually more men around. And they didn't have many opportunities to spend the salary they got as part of the Single Digit's squad. So it was a good diversion.

Even Exceles had no real hobbies.

Active Magicmasters never had the time to indulge in hobbies in the first place, but Fanon was unusual in that way. Despite her busy schedule, she would find time whenever she could to go into the city.

"Still, all these women and not a single marriage proposal?" Exceles jokingly complained.

"I'm just saving up money for whenever I am to be taken as a bride," said one squad member.

"Just finding the kind of man who'll quietly wait for you to come home is backbreaking. And that's with us spending less time in the Outer World than

other nations thanks to Lady Fanon,” added another.

The squad members joined in one after another. Fortunately, the clamor went largely unnoticed on the busy streets. But it had been quite a while since they had last let their hair down. There hadn't been any turnover in their ranks lately either, which Exceles hoped wouldn't change.

As if brushing aside that melancholy, Fanon in the lead spun her umbrella and turned around in high spirits. “Who cares about marriage? Single or not, the present is fun enough. Besides, all of you would be wasted on boorish men.”

“Yeah...” a voice said in agreement, and the others nodded.

It was a peaceful day off, even if they were an elite squad under a Single Digit Magicmaster. It being one of the few metropolitan areas in the nation, the city's residents had gotten used to their presence. Nobody made a fuss or called out to them, as they didn't want to interrupt the people who propped up the nation's defenses.

And since Fanon in particular was out and about often, that unspoken rule had firmly taken root in the hearts of the people.

Exceles decided to consider this, combined with Fanon's cute appearance, a part of her natural virtue. People made way for them, but it seemed that information about the taboos had spread not just within the military but to the people of the city as well.

Despite Fanon being the highest ranked Magicmaster in Clevideet, the people pretended not to see her and gave only short greetings. The fact that nobody touched on Fanon's youthful appearance was a huge help for Exceles. If something like that were to happen, it would be her job as second-in-command to soothe Fanon before her rage could impact the city.

But Exceles did have another concern.

“By the way, Lady Fanon. There was an emergency summons from Sir Clough, so were you fine with this?”

Clough vide Deet was Clevideet's ruler. As the top of the nation, he bypassed the Governor-General and gave orders directly to its Single Digit Magicmaster, something that wasn't particularly rare in the seven nations.

In Clevideet, Clough opted not to split politics and military, and kept command over both of them. Because of that, he announced military achievements rather than the Governor-General. He demonstrated the value and greatness of Magicmasters while protecting the nation's dignity and prestige.

Because of that, the ruler would sometimes summon Fanon directly.

But with her personality, she wouldn't accept something for nothing. She was always demanding some sort of reward, such as reserving the top fashion street just for her or allowing her personal use of entertainment facilities meant for state guests for an entire day in combination with special leave.

At any rate, the summons this time probably concerned a reward and ceremony for the recent results.

"It's fine. I've accepted a ridiculous request before, having to go back and forth between the Outer World for two weeks and with all of the Fiends around—there wasn't even time to get a proper shower. Besides, today's my day off, so I'm not going no matter what he says!" said Fanon.

"Okay, okay, I understand," Exceles answered.

Regardless of the mission, if she wasn't in the mood, Fanon would throw a fuss and push her own will through. Once "No way" escaped her lips, it was no easy task to persuade her.

I am here to keep that from happening, but unfortunately, I am sort of in agreement this time. Exceles couldn't find it in herself to dislike Fanon's decision to keep her work and private time separate. If anything, she quite liked it.

"But what does he want?" asked Fanon.

"Ah, so you do wonder," said Exceles.

"Well, knowing that old man, he'll be calling for me tomorrow anyways," said Fanon.

Exceles wondered how appropriate it was to call the ruler "old man," but she decided to simply ignore it. "All right, let's go into that alley. I want to hear what

everyone has to say.”

With a low, serious voice, the second-in-command guided the other squad members silently into an empty alleyway and spoke up once more.

“In case you were wondering, we received an emergency report from Sir Clough. A theft happened in Area 90 recently, and confidential military supplies were stolen.”

“Area 90 is a military installation that handles magic equipment, right? So was it an inside job? I find it hard to believe that someone unrelated to the government or military could get access to a top-level security facility,” one of the squad members said.

“Apparently, it wasn’t. According to the contact I received, there was an attack from the outside.”

Everyone’s expression clouded over at Exceles’s answer. As soldiers, they all knew that Area 90 was the place where newly developed AWRs, their spares, magical tools confiscated from magical criminals, and the like were stored and managed. In essence, it was like a special armory. And if it had been attacked, then...

The squad looked concerned, and it was Fanon who asked what was on everyone’s mind. “I don’t know if the security was lax or something, but isn’t that the security forces’ fault? Why would they bring that to those of us in charge of the Outer World?”

“Being what it is, they had quite a big security force. And as you say, there’s no reason to get you involved in domestic troubles since you focus on the Outer World. However, I’m sure the ruler is aware of that as well,” said Exceles.

“Which means that there’s something fishy going on?” asked Fanon.

“Yes, it seems the culprit is on the run. There’s only a few people, even on the outside, who can not only launch an attack but also make an escape.”

Fanon casually brushed off what Exceles was implying. “I don’t care. Like I said, I have the day off! I’m not doing it!”

“In that case,” Exceles said with a sigh, “I will send the ruler an official

refusal.”

“Make an official protest as well. I’ll pass on any other interruptions on my days off.”

“Yes, yes, I know. At least make sure you sign it personally, then,” said Exceles. There was no way that an answer like that would be accepted without Fanon’s signature.

I wonder if every nation is so rough with their treatment of Magicmasters, Exceles thought. Even so, she was happy that Fanon was a Single Digit Magicmaster of Clevideet.

At the very least, they weren’t threatened by invasions of Fiends and were able to peacefully spend time in the city thanks to her. But it was a strange squad, with members just as willful as Fanon, but deep down they probably found it enjoyable, just like Exceles did.

While the others were lost in such sentiment, one of the women suddenly spoke, “Lady Exceles, I think it’s fine to put a stop to this talk here. Lady Fanon’s power is meant for the wide Outer World, not for capturing some thief, right?”

The others were nodding in agreement.

“Yes, that is my concern too. Certainly when it comes to defensive forces, Lady Fanon is the pinnacle of Clevideet’s Magicmasters. Perhaps that was what they’re looking for,” said Exceles.

Fanon decided to correct that statement. “When it comes to defense, I am No. 1. I don’t know much about the other Magicmasters, but I bet that they’re all simpletons like that one from Halcapdia.”

Exceles recalled Fanon talking about how Halcapdia’s Single, Galgnis Theotort, had made a fool of himself. Apparently, he’d picked a fight with Alpha’s Magicmaster and ended up getting the tables turned on him in a huge embarrassment.

“Don’t let other nations’ Magicmasters hear you say that, Lady Fanon,” said Exceles.

“Who cares what the small fry think. Although, I guess the rank 3 and above

are pretty good,” responded Fanon.

The squad members exchanged wry smiles, realizing that Fanon was starting on that again. She talked a big game, but she could back it up, so it was hard to retort. In fact, quite a few people felt that Fanon being ranked No. 4 was her being underestimated.

Any nation tends to elevate their own Singles, but there were enough reasons for Clevideet’s opinions to not so easily be dismissed. In the recent sortie, Fanon had set up a defensive line far away from Clevideet’s borders and dealt with all manners of Fiends. Exceles herself respected Fanon’s abilities more than anyone.

“Let’s just forget about this stupid work talk. Did you forget that today’s our day off?”

Everyone’s faces twitched at Fanon’s words. They were often too caught up in the details and couldn’t really relax even on their days off. At this rate, they wouldn’t get married for a long while.

“It’s our first day off in a while, so let’s enjoy it. For starters, why not get something to eat in preparation for the shopping afterwards?” asked Fanon.

“Sounds good!” said Exceles. “We can’t well go into battle on empty stomachs.”

The group agreed.

There would no doubt be a commotion caused by Fanon’s visit, but Exceles felt it was inevitable as she agreed. So with the second-in-command’s agreement, the rest of the group cheered in anticipation of a luxury lunch.

Exceles’s eyes stopped on the other side of the crowd where a large man was making his way over. He was practically a giant, measuring over two meters, and beside him was a slim man in an old military uniform.

They exuded an unusual air but didn’t give off a particularly crude impression. They moved like trained soldiers. The large man wore an overcoat that covered his massive frame, but the top of his shoulders bulged unusually. He looked well trained, but it was still abnormal.

Perhaps sensing Exceles's suspicious stare, the large man smiled slightly. When he put his hand in his pocket, the air around them popped.

"What?!" Exceles doubted her ears. It was the rare sound of gunfire.

When she identified that sound, tension ran through her body. In this society of magic, an old-fashioned weapon like that was never used.

But this was a city full of people, and Exceles had a terrible feeling. It was the signal before all hell was unleashed.

After the giant of a man fired a single shot into the sky, it set the slim man in motion. He pulled out a gun of his own and shot a passerby between the eyes as if to make an example of them. Then he started firing wildly in all directions.

It seemed like a modernized firearm, but the barrel of the gun showed flashes of mana light as magic bullets were fired.

"A gun AWR?! Everyone, please run away!" Exceles shouted, but her warning came a little too late.

The people around them had stopped and looked in the direction of the sound, trying to figure out what was happening.

The next moment, somebody screamed.

And then, panic.

The slim man mercilessly fired at the fleeing citizens, tearing large holes in defenseless civilians. Blood spattered and stained the paved road. Before long, the street looked like a scene from hell.

The crowd never thought to fight back. They just screamed and ran. Anyone who fell was stepped on by someone who fell in turn and was also trampled. Panic spread like a wildfire.

When the next shot was fired, it was repelled by a magic barrier. On the other side of the barrier was Clevideet's ranked No. 4 Magicmaster, Fanon Trooper, her eyes wide open.

White smoke rose from her umbrella as if it had been superheated. The surface glowed red with the magic formula for the barrier she had just created.

“Lady Fanon, I will cover you!” exclaimed Exceles.

Fanon simply glared at the two men in the middle of the panic, as if she hadn’t even heard Exceles’s words. The rest of the squad also readied themselves to fight.

Then, of the two enemies, the large man moved first. He threw away his gun and reached towards the sky. Several chains woven with mana appeared from above and shackled the necks of fleeing civilians.

The chains spread farther and farther down the streets in search of more victims. And before long, five people had been dragged in front of the man by a magical shackle around their necks. They wore anguished expressions as they desperately tried to break free, but only a Magicmaster could remove such bonds.

The large man laughed with a deep voice. “How fortunate to be able to test out this AWR in such a fun place.”

The slim man agreed. “Indeed, Warden Gordon. This gun AWR fits perfectly in my hand. It seems it can fire supercompressed bullets too.”

“That’s ‘former warden’ now,” said the man named Gordon.

“Ah, so it is. Excuse me,” replied the slim man.

“Your weapon seems useful. I think I will give mine another try. I hope my skills haven’t dulled from having nothing to do but wrangle prisoners in a small prison. Well, I have no complaints about facing a Single,” Gordon said and threw off his overcoat.

There was a long, obsidian-colored third arm on his back. That was what had made it look so swollen. The arm was large enough to grab people and had complex mechanical joints.

The next moment, the magic formula engraved in it began to faintly glow. Its crude fingers formed a giant fist that Gordon swung at the shackled people.

They curled up and screamed, tears streaming from their eyes. However, Fanon’s barrier appeared before them to protect them. But the barrier lasted less than one second against the mana-enchanted giant fist.

“Heh heh!” Gordon laughed and put even more strength into the arm, trying to crush his victims.

At that moment, the ground cracked and a shock wave blew up dust and debris. When the smoke cleared, there was a large hole in the ground. Not even flesh and bone was left of the victims.

Gordon casually pulled on the chain that was supposed to be connected to the shackles on the people, but it had been cut cleanly off.

“What’s that supposed to be, Exceles?” Fanon spoke to her second-in-command with a quiet voice and expressionless eyes.

“A violent magical criminal, it seems. With an AWR I’ve never seen before,” Exceles said and signaled the other squad members to back off.

They understood her intentions and assumed a defensive formation to protect the five civilians who had been saved by Fanon’s barrier.

“Unfortunately, we don’t have the Three Precept Contradiction with us,” Exceles said in a tense voice. She spoke of an AWR exclusively made for Fanon like her umbrella had been, but it wasn’t something she usually brought with her.

“That’s not what I am asking,” said Fanon, unsatisfied with Exceles’s answer. She was clearly in a foul mood. “I’m asking what that is supposed to be!”

By “that” Fanon meant the AWR with the power to break through the barrier of the world’s Hardest Magicmaster and let its wielder commit violence against innocent civilians. She glared at it with hatred in her eyes.

The man grinned back at Fanon.

“It’s a new type, an AWR integrated with the body. They called it Barbaros,” said Gordon.

“Tsk! Is that what was stolen from Area 90?” asked Fanon.

“Yes, modified gun AWRs and a new, top secret AWR were stolen... So it is almost definitely the gun the slim man is using and that Barbaros,” said Exceles.

Barbaros was an AWR made from meteor metal into the image of a relic from the past. This was the first time Fanon or Exceles had seen it.

In fact, the same was probably true for the rest of the squad, meaning that nobody knew how to counter it or what its true potential was.

They also couldn't let their guard down around the gun AWR. There had been many attempts in recent years to adapt the guns of the past into AWRs, making some of the most advanced armaments available.

"And unless I misheard, the accomplice called that large man Warden Gordon," noted Exceles.

"Who's that supposed to be? I've never heard of him," said Fanon.

"If the list of military assignments I've seen in the past is correct, he is a Magicmaster from our nation who was secretly assigned to a prison in the Outer World."

Fanon had heard rumors of the Trojan Prison, which was run by all seven nations and located in the Outer World. While it was hidden from the public, it was difficult to completely eliminate rumors of it.

While each nation sent skilled people to guard it, it was too shady for someone who had ambition or prospects for promotion. Therefore, an elite like Fanon had no connection to it whatsoever.

"So a former warden? But that doesn't matter. I'll make sure to properly thank them for staining my day off with blood."

Gordon smiled fearlessly at Fanon.

"I'm the one who would like to thank you. You will make the perfect guinea pig for testing out the performance of this new weapon, young lady."

While Fanon and Gordon were speaking, her subordinates evacuated the civilians, then moved swiftly into an attack formation. As Magicmasters of a Single Digit squad, they were all first-rate Magicmasters in their own right.

The air became tense as they surrounded Gordon and the slim man. The skillful coordination and the agility of their attack was the best in Clevideet. They jumped at the two men and swung their AWRs.

"How lacking." Despite their numbers, Gordon showed no signs of being perturbed.

In an instant, he punched one in the stomach, easily blocked the kick of another, and used Barbaros to grab the head of a third and stop them from moving. The obsidian arm glowed with the light of mana.

“Blow up,” he said.

The woman trapped between the crude fingers grinned at Gordon and with a quick snap bent her fingers. When she did, the ground on all sides of Gordon burst open as rock spears shot towards him. She had decided to take him with her.

“Pathetic,” Gordon spat out and stomped the ground. The ground cracked and the rock spears were crushed.

“Now, let’s try something else,” Gordon said, and Barbaros showed signs of constructing a spell.

“Perhaps this is more to your liking?” a squad member said, jumping behind Gordon and swinging one of her hands down. A giant lava arm traced the same path towards Gordon.

“*«Agni»!*” she yelled.

“Taking down me and your friend huh?!” Gordon canceled the spell that Barbaros was about to discharge and pointed it behind him.

Agni was a highly complicated partial summoning spell that summoned the massive arm of a fire god, but because only a portion of the giant’s body was summoned, it was quick to activate.

Seeing the approaching mass of flame, Gordon’s eyes widened. Dodging was impossible, so he moved Barbaros to intercept it. But because he had been in such a rush and was not yet accustomed to the AWR, his posture was ruined and his body was pulled along with the momentum.

Meanwhile, Agni’s flames touched the open palm of Barbaros, where a magical core glowed. The giant arm was instantly dissolved and turned into mana particles.

“What?!” The female squad member’s eyes opened in astonishment.

Gordon, who’d already recovered, stood ready to attack when she landed.

They'd tested Barbaros and been unable to defeat it, so he might as well use the claws to pierce his prey.

In that moment—

"Where are you looking?" a somewhat high-pitched girl's voice rang out next to Gordon.

Moving just his eyes, he saw a small girl with an umbrella soundlessly stepping into his reach. "So you're finally getting involved, are you, young lady? But you don't look like the type to fight in close combat."

Fanon said nothing.

Gordon was able to stay calm because of his partner. The slim man had already made his move and was pointing the barrel of his gun at Fanon's head...

However...the moment before he could pull the trigger, there was a quick movement and he thought twice, because the tip of Fanon's AWR umbrella was suddenly pressed into the barrel, holding it in place, unable to move. Despite her attention being on Gordon, Fanon was still aware of her surroundings.

Even if the slim man wanted to fire the gun, when he saw the mana concentrated in the umbrella, he couldn't help but waver. If he tried to shoot, the gun and bullet might misfire and hurt him instead.

But the man paid the hesitation no mind. Out of the corner of his vision, he saw the Magicmaster who had been freed from Barbaros make a rapid retreat. He realized that Fanon had taken advantage of his pause to buy time for her subordinate to escape.

But regardless of what her goal was, he just had to pull the trigger.

The next moment, there was an explosion in front of the barrel, and he was hit by a shock wave. However, the man's smile deepened.

Even as he was blown away, he held his military cap down and dexterously flipped in midair to land in a crouched position. He turned his smile on Fanon and stood back up.

He was practically unharmed. He had changed out the explosive bullet he was using to another kind.

As a result, while he'd been blown away, it wasn't an explosion powerful enough to hurt him.

The barrel of his AWR was glowing red hot, but it wasn't anything serious. In fact, it was within normal limits.

Meanwhile, the tip of Fanon's umbrella AWR burst open like a blooming flower. It had practically been destroyed, proof of the gun AWR's power.

The slim man hadn't just changed from an explosive bullet, he'd enchanted the next bullet with armor-piercing properties meant to destroy hard things, and Fanon's umbrella didn't seem able to withstand it.

Her umbrella wasn't able to stop the bullet, but she swung the umbrella and just barely deflected it. But in the end, the man's choices and reaction time won out, and he was pleased with his AWR's performance and his ability to change magic bullets.

Fanon stared at the destroyed umbrella with cold eyes, then turned to look at Gordon in front of her.

"I really liked this umbrella too..." said Fanon.

"You shouldn't be looking away, because you're going to break soon." Gordon looked down and laughed at Fanon.

"Keep your stinking mouth closed, old man," said Fanon. The next moment, something rained down on Gordon from above.

When he looked up, he saw a giant wall approaching. It was a barrier Fanon had created, and it covered an area vast enough to include the entire main street, like the sky was falling.

"You idiot! There might be nowhere for me to run, but you're just going to get crushed too!" yelled Gordon.

"You belong below me." Fanon didn't look particularly worried as she brought her finger down. Changing the shapes of her barriers was simple for her.

Gordon used Barbaros to support the falling barrier, but his legs began sinking into the ground.

"Guh... I can't hold it up!"

Of course, he couldn't, since it wasn't falling due to gravity. Fanon was using the barrier to drive Gordon's massive frame into the ground. Gordon was succumbing to the entirety of the mana making up the barrier moving towards a focal point on the ground. That technique alone made Fanon's barrier magic the greatest in the seven nations.

However, despite the situation he was in, Gordon wore a confident smile.

"How naive... This is not how you break a person," Gordon said.

Fanon looked at him with surprise as the core in Barbaros's palm started to glow. Then the massive barrier shattered and its fragments rained down, disappearing like ice melting in spring.

Then Barbaros's massive arm swung down at Fanon's small body. She dodged it with a backflip, but that was when the slim man fired on her. She stumbled a step forward to dodge the magic bullet, but the slim man had already unleashed his trump card.

A bullet of compressed air, one that was near impossible to sense, was soundlessly moving towards Fanon.

At that moment, a squad member jumped forward and stood in the way of the invisible magic bullet with earth-armored fists. However, the bullet was not repelled. It pierced the armor as well as the arm beneath it, and fresh blood spurted into the air.

Fortunately, she had swung her arm, so the trajectory changed and it missed Fanon.

"Ack! I'm sorry, Lady Fanon." The anguished woman held her bleeding arm.

"You don't have to do anything unnecessary," Fanon said as mana swelled from her body due to her rage at seeing her subordinate injured. Seeing as how Fanon's magic was more suited for such a wide area, the city could be destroyed if the fight continued like this.

The injured subordinate smiled and retreated. She knew that Fanon's AWR wasn't suited for fighting in places like these with lots of people to protect around.

Nevertheless, Fanon was the strongest Magicmaster in the country. With her vast amounts of mana, she would cast a powerful spell, and even half-destroyed, her umbrella AWR could assist in spell-construction.

Seeing the signs of a spell, the slim man's sharp eyes glinted under his military cap, and he fired another magic bullet to stop her.

"Explosive Magazine. <<*Biamma*>>"

Fire spewed from the barrel as a single bullet was shot. But Fanon's barrier completed in an instant to protect the squad members.

However, just before impact, the single bullet split into a rain of countless smaller bullets, each created with mana. Each impact resulted in a small explosion, magically destroying the barrier's construction.

The assault seemed to go on forever, and hundreds if not thousands of magic bullets slammed into Fanon's barrier. But rather than just hitting the barrier directly, they repeatedly ricocheted off one another in waves, giving the impression of an endless tropical thunderstorm.

In the face of that unending attack, Fanon had to cancel the spell she was constructing and precisely deploy barriers to cover all directions. As time passed, the barrier lost durability, and bullets began to pierce through. It seemed she couldn't ignore the damage to her AWR after all.

Don't screw with me! Fanon cursed in her mind and poured power into her arm to add additional barriers. With that she was finally able to hold back the rain of bullets. When she looked up, she saw Gordon approaching her with Barbaros's palm open.

Fanon had a barrier around herself as well, but his goal was simple.

Mana convergence through forced cancellation...! Fanon realized.

Gordon had already displayed the power of Barbaros by disassembling and nullifying her barriers and using Agni earlier. Fanon could see what was coming from how the special core was glowing, but she was busy putting up barriers and couldn't move.

Two of the squad members sensed that and moved to either side of her, firing

advanced fire and wind magic in an attack meant to keep momentum on their side.

On the battlefield, their decision would have been correct. However...

“Get back!!!” Realizing their attack was pointless against Barbaros, Fanon leaped in front of them.

Just before the fire and wind could hit, the core in Barbaros began to glow, and its collected mana was unleashed towards them. Their two spells were quickly drowned out by a tremendous white ray of light, and a radiance of death assaulted Fanon and her subordinates.

Fanon thrust her umbrella into the ground and threw her hands forward. Exceles, who had kept out of the fighting, came behind Fanon and put her hand on Fanon’s back.

But Exceles wasn’t a healing Magicmaster, so her action didn’t seem to have any magical meaning behind it. But it did divert Fanon’s attention, and she seemed to shift her deployment of barriers.

Some of them weren’t deployed, but others were in seemingly unrelated places all around: underneath rubble, in the shade of a tree, and so on. It was difficult to understand, but regardless, the barriers were as durable as they could be.

The largest dome-shaped barrier was covered in a faintly glowing magic formula, proof that it was distinctly stronger than any barrier before it.

It had never failed to block a spell in the past, but Fanon looked visibly uncomfortable. Barbaros’s light increased, and Fanon gritted her teeth. Buildings collapsed and trees were torn up from their roots. In the aftermath, everything was left exposed.

“Ugh!” Fanon ground her teeth.

Their battle of mana continued like a tug of war...and after some time, it finally concluded. Barbaros’s mana gradually weakened and dispersed as it stopped working. But it left evidence of its terrifying power—parts of the buildings outside Fanon’s barrier had completely disappeared.

Breathing raggedly, Fanon looked at that and finally undid the barriers. Faint white smoke rose from her hands.

Seeing that, Gordon spoke to the slim man without any particular surprise. “Hmm, as expected of the world’s Hardest Magicmaster: not even that broke her barrier. I suppose it’s a matter of compatibility, but next time... Well, now I know that she’s no match for me. We’re leaving, Suzar.”

“Are you fine with that, Warden?” asked Suzar.

“How many times do I have to tell you, it’s ‘former warden’...? No matter. Besides, in the past I used to be a Single Digit Magicmaster candidate before I got stuffed into the warden role,” said Gordon.

“That’s news to me,” said Suzar.

“Yes, it’s not something I spread around. Frankly, there was a time when I was ashamed to have lost to such a little girl and been given a dead-end job dealing with prisoners. I was hoping to get rid of a long-term grudge, but I’ve lost interest. If this is what a Single is, then the position of top Magicmaster in a nation is nothing special.”

Gordon looked at his gleaming, black AWR. “More importantly, this new power, Barbaros, is wonderful. Smashing and crushing those old-fashioned rulers’ values will be fun. My business in Clevideet and this small test of Fanon Trooper is over. Continuing this rampage and killing the ruler and the top brass won’t be much of a challenge.”

“Then let’s group up with Dante. Not that he can be trusted,” said Suzar.

“What trust is there to be had in such criminals...?” asked Gordon. “Suzar, it seems you still need to shake off your rust.”

Suzar narrowed his eyes and laughed at Gordon’s words. Having been present since the beginning of the prison-escape plan, he would accompany Gordon to the end.

As he started to leave, Gordon looked behind him. Barbaros swung and erased a spell that came flying. It was a parting gift Fanon had aimed at their backs, and Gordon stopped it with a simple swipe.

“So she can fire barriers out like bullets. Maybe she’s trying to mock your gun AWR, Suzar. Or maybe she’s responsible for the prototype. Still, she has an insane amount of mana,” said Gordon.

After creating all those barriers, Fanon shouldn’t have had much mana left, but it seemed she still had some to spare.

“That’s a boring trick to throw in vain. Being able to construct spells to that degree with a half-destroyed AWR takes some impressive skill, but it’s not worth fearing. I won’t go so far to say that we are absolutely superior, but this is pitiful. I doubt we would fall behind even if we met again,” said Suzar.

“Yeah, if we were to meet that is,” Gordon spat out and slowly began to walk.

On his way, he used Barbaros to pick up some debris and toss it nonchalantly behind him. Some distance away, Fanon had the palm of her hand out towards Gordon and Suzar and suddenly sensed something flying at her at tremendous speeds. She threw up a barrier in front of her.

A stone crashed into it at an extreme speed. The spinning debris gradually drilled into the barrier and weakened it bit by bit. Eventually the barrier cracked, and the stone broke through, hitting Fanon’s forehead.

The stone was Gordon’s response to her parting gift.

Fanon collapsed to the ground, but when her subordinates rushed over, they found her looking up at the sky with her eyes open. A trickle of blood ran down her forehead.

Exceles leaned over to look at her face. “Are you okay?”

She hadn’t actively participated in the battle, but that was because her skills weren’t suited for combat. Fanon and the others all knew that, so they made no mention of it.

Well, she had made one important contribution to the battle. That aside, at Exceles’s question, Fanon’s expression crumpled, turned grim, and she roared in anger.

Her rage was simple and to the point. “I’ll kill them!”

“That last pebble did make it look like he was toying with you. But there was a difference in AWRs,” Exceles said, attempting to soothe Fanon.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, FUCK!” Fanon spat out again. She got back up and looked around.

A trail of devastating damage had been left in Barbaros’s wake. But if not for Exceles, there would have been more dead.

When Fanon had created the large number of barriers to oppose Barbaros, Exceles’s touch had communicated with Fanon through a special skill. She’d conveyed the location of fleeing civilians.

In that instant, Fanon had defended against the radiation of mana while deploying over three hundred barriers, keeping the number of people losing their lives to a minimum. She’d protected not just her squad but countless civilians scattered behind her.

“Let’s concede this one to them and make preparations for the next time. Besides, this is what happens when you forcibly turn a fashionable umbrella into an AWR,” said Exceles.

“Hmph.” Fanon unhappily snorted before worriedly approaching another squad member.

“I’m sorry about before. Is your arm okay?” she asked. The squad member had protected Fanon against the magic bullet. It hadn’t hit her body, but it had still gone through her arm, so she wasn’t exactly unharmed.

She had a cloth wrapped around her arm now as a makeshift bandage to stop the bleeding. It was made from clothes they had just bought from the boutique.

In fact, most of the bags with clothes they’d bought had been blown away. But even if they found them, the clothes were all probably unwearable...so using one as a bandage was for the better.

“I am sorry, Lady Fanon. I let my guard down.”

“No, it’s fine. No matter what I said, I knew what you would do at times like that.”

“Then this is a badge of honor. But I’ll heal it right back up and get back to the

front line!” The woman saluted and added, “Because of my injury, I will have to withdraw my request for leave.”

“Just get some rest. I’ll go beat the hell out of both of them later,” said Fanon.

“Then I will leave it to you, Captain!” the subordinate replied in a playful tone.

Fanon nodded with a smile in response before her expression turned more severe again. While she fumed, another subordinate wrapped cloth around Fanon’s forehead and burned palm as an emergency measure.

Exceles confirmed the situation and suggested what they should do next. “Let’s first get you some proper treatment, Lady Fanon.”

“Exceles, we can do that while chasing after those two,” said Fanon.

“I thought you’d say that, which is why I have already called for a healing Magicmaster,” said Exceles. “I have also contacted the military authorities, so they should be arriving soon too.”

Hearing just what she wanted to hear, Fanon smiled.

“I used my authority to bring out two of the Three Precept Contradiction. I felt that Aegis in particular would be needed.”

“Perfect. Well done, Exceles. But since you didn’t participate in the battle, you must have done more, haven’t you? You would receive a failing grade as a second-in-command if all you did was tell me the positions of civilians,” said Fanon.

Exceles sighed and nodded.

“Who do you think I am?” Exceles asked, and a strange bruise by her collarbone gradually spread to her chin and cheek.

The squad particularly respected their leader and her second-in-command. But Exceles was not just the second-in-command, she was also a spotter and ranked No. 1 at that. She hadn’t joined the battle to keep the scope of her abilities from being revealed to the enemy.

“It’s finally my turn, and I am not letting them slip away. It seems they are currently moving rapidly away. I have a perfect grasp of their location. They’re making their way to”—suddenly Exceles looked perplexed, and her face clouded

over—“Alpha... They are heading towards the neighboring nation.”

Unlike civilians, as a member of the military, Fanon couldn't go into a different nation to chase after an enemy. Since Singles were walking one-man armies, if it became known that she had entered another nation without permission, it could be considered a military invasion and would cause a serious diplomatic situation.

But going through the proper procedures to get permission would take too much time.

“That's enough! Who cares if it's another nation! The moment my Three Precept Contradiction arrives, we're going after them. Besides, we can just come up with some random excuse for crossing the border, right, Exceles?” said Fanon.

“Uh...well, we are in a clear state of engagement with them, so we could make up some reasonable-sounding excuse. But it will definitely become a problem later,” responded her second-in-command.

“I don't care! I'm not letting them get away!”

Fanon was in a terrible mood. When she was like this, it was no easy feat to stop her. Even if they tried to use force, there was practically nobody in the nation who could stop her.

That said, everyone in the squad was raring to go. None of them were mature enough to tolerate their revered captain being mocked. Even the sensible Exceles had already come up with an excuse to give Alpha, even if she did think it would be a hassle to clean up the mess afterwards.

“A Clevideet city has been damaged, and there are injured civilians. If we say we are chasing after criminals who are internationally dangerous, they should be a bit cooperative,” explained Exceles. “We could even present it as offering our help to prevent danger from harming Alpha. Considering the situation, as long as Clevideet acts in good faith, we should be able to resolve it. It'll end up being after the fact, but if we make a request to the ruler and have her treat it as an official dispatch of a Single, then she won't be able to ignore it politically.”

“I'll leave that to you,” said Fanon. “More importantly, don't lose sight of

them, Exceles.”

“Of course. As you know, I have a grasp of their mana bodies, so I won’t make that kind of blunder. The other party would need to be able to get a good read on not just the flow of mana but also all the mana in their surrounding area. Either way, they won’t discover me.”

“Then we’re moving out once my AWR arrives,” repeated Fanon.

“Should we gather the rest of the squad?” asked Exceles. “I’m sure they will happily return from their vacation.”

“That won’t be necessary. Just get the ones that can move now. But do get the squad’s equipment ready by the border. And my military uniform,” said Fanon.

“Understood.”

Exceles had the wounded squad member who was withdrawing serve as a liaison to the top brass. Even without the stolen AWR, the enemy was strong enough to oppose a Single Digit Magicmaster, and if Gordon had been warden of a secret prison like Exceles believed, it was a serious matter.

It was possible it didn’t just involve Gordon and Suzar, Exceles thought, looking in Alpha’s direction.

“Speaking of... All of the clothes went to waste.”

Having decided on a course of action, Fanon had calmed down a little, allowing her to remember today’s bounty. And she looked a little sad. She’d been the one looking forward to her day off the most. She’d had a lot of fun bringing five women from her squad with her.

As her shoulders dropped, the squad members came up to her. “It’s okay. Once we clean this up, we can do it all over again. Let’s go to that store again, Lady Fanon.”

“Yes, let’s ask for consecutive days off next time. We’ll have the entire squad make a petition to the ruler,” said another member.

They were not just being considerate. They had also had a lot of fun and were sad to see it end so abruptly.

Fanon was a little overwhelmed by their kind words, and for a moment, her lips trembled like a small child, but she soon pulled them firmly together. Exceles usually thought this side of the squad members was naive, but even she felt some sympathy for Fanon.

Today even Exceles had ended up having clothes bought for her. And even though she didn't think they suited her because they were a little too cute for her liking and not something she'd feel comfortable wearing in public, she knew Fanon had put her heart into choosing them. So they were precious to her.

Yet they had been lost in Gordon's rampage.

"Lady Fanon, please do cheer up. I don't know much about fashion myself, so perhaps you can pick something out for me again," said Exceles.

"Yeah. Okay," Fanon muttered after a moment, eyes cast down. It seemed their selfish princess had cheered up.

Exceles looked a little relieved when she suddenly sensed a presence. "Oh, it seems they were faster than I thought," she said.

Exceles saw the squad members running over at full speed. Two of them were tightly holding a large cylinder each.

Seventy-Eighth Chapter

Plus One

“Aha ha ha ha! You’re too weak!” a girl’s high-pitched voice rang out over the training grounds of the Second Magical Institute.

Taking advantage of the fact that nobody was around to see it, Lilisha loudly and mercilessly sneered at Tesfia. Although it had been Tesfia’s provocations that started everything, once their mock battle began, the difference in strength between Lilisha and Tesfia was apparent to anyone.

This was due in part to Lilisha’s new AWR, which performed so well it even attracted Alus’s attention. It was an unusual type of high-performing AWR that was equipped to a finger. But of all things, it was the Fable family that had sent it.

However, with the exception of Tesfia’s Kikuri, AWRs typically optimized themselves for their users through the accumulation of mana information. So it was hard to believe that it was handed down considering how well Tesfia used it.

Did they have an AWR of that caliber lying around with nobody using it? It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that it was made with the intent of handling mana steel threads. It makes sense to assume that it is related to Selva in some way, but to think they’d just give it away... Alus thought.

Alus’s cheeks twitched at the caliber of the Fable family’s generosity as he watched the two girls fight.

I don’t know what they’re planning, but it’s far too high quality to just toss to a stranger, he thought.

At the very least, it wasn’t something one would imagine the Fable family giving to Lilisha after she’d bared her fangs at them.

Who can ever understand what nobles are thinking. But if I think too hard

about it, I'll just end up right where they want me.

Alus didn't care to learn about noble society or their fetters and customs, be it Frose Fable or anyone else.

Loki looked pensive and was thinking of something different from Alus. She had a very combative mindset, but as a young maiden she got a failing grade.

"Well, that's definitely nasty, don't you think?" asked Alus.

"Yes! How is she going to overcome that?" answered Loki seriously when Alus suddenly turned towards her.

When seeing someone strong, it was natural for a Magicmaster to think of countermeasures rather than marveling at them.

"You could say that the threads from that AWR are special. It's not just a matter of strength either. You can see them oscillating a little, can't you? It's a very sensible use of mana steel threads," said Alus.

The threads were strong but could still be freely manipulated. Plus, from what Alus could see, the vibrations could interfere with magic. It was like the threads were manifesting Railpine, one of the tricks up Alus's sleeve that created powerful vibrations. The threads were tearing up any magic that touched them.

Using magic to fight magic was standard practice when Magicmasters fought other people, but the usual techniques would fail when faced with this thread.

Lilisha had learned assassination techniques and wasn't skilled at typical magic, so this thread perfectly covered her weakness. It allowed her to replace a standard magic against magic fray with her specialty, mana against magic.

This even gave her the advantage when fighting on the limited training grounds. Conversely, Tesfia had to fend off attacks from all directions in a complete nightmare of a situation. Fortunately, the worst damage Lilisha's threads would inflict would be a headache. It was a mock battle, after all.

Alus folded his arms and watched the conflict develop. He whispered to Loki, "If you put yourself in that position, think of what you could and could not do."

With that, Loki stared at the sparring girls with even more intensity.

Meanwhile, Tesfia was stuck in defensive mode, unable to switch over to the

offensive. Seeing her spells cut to pieces, she had given up on directly attacking with spells and kept a moderate distance where she could attack with her AWR.

She was handling herself much better than she used to, swinging her katana without hesitation as she sped towards Lilisha. However, Lilisha showed no signs of faltering and elegantly raised her right hand. It was equipped with Magdala, the AWR that had grabbed Alus's attention.

Tesfia's Kikuri sliced below it, but a high-pitched metallic sound rang out. Five threads had spread from Lilisha's fingers to the ground, and the hardened threads became a wall that blocked Tesfia's slash.

Tesfia must have seen such a defense coming, though, as Kikuri turned into an Ice Blade and left thin frost on the threads. She changed direction and swung her blade upward across the frozen threads, aiming for Lilisha's right hand.

Then there was a strange clicking sound.

If there had been other spectators around, they would have been shocked by what had happened. Lilisha had just blocked Tesfia's slash with Magdala.

But it was how she'd blocked it that was surprising. She had used only the single finger of Magdala, causing dense mana to blur space like oil in water—and the blade had stopped just at the claw of the AWR.

Lilisha had been confident that she could pull it off, but the success still brought a pleased smile to her face. As if in response to her glossy lips curling up, the surface of Magdala gleamed in a mysterious light. The next moment, several mana steel threads shot out from the tip of the finger and wrapped themselves around Tesfia's blade.

Tesfia pulled on her katana and managed to shake it free from the thread. Then she raised the palm of her free hand into the air. It didn't take long for a massive wall of ice to rise up between the two girls.

But the next moment, Tesfia had to jump back as countless threads shredded the wall.

"Phew, I recall Selva being skilled with those threads too," she said. "Did you put all of your effort into that because of your pitiful magic?"

“You don’t have to say that! But that’s fine. Even with Alus teaching you, it looks like you have a ways to go. I’ll be able to brush off your nonsense for the time being.” Lilisha flashed Tesfia a condescending smile, as if to say that bracing herself was pointless.

Tesfia’s temples twitched and her mana exploded out in anger, instantly creating a massive Icicle Sword. The blade shone in a bright blue. It was as beautiful as a glass sculpture.

Tesfia fought back with a refined smile. Exhaling a breath of cold air, she snapped her wrist and the sword shot forward. “At least try not to die from this, Lilisha.”

It was a strange mock battle. Neither side was directly cursing the other, opting instead to stab at each other with roundabout words. It was a mental fistfight wearing the mask of nobility.

But that aside, Tesfia’s last attack was a dangerous one. The power of her Icicle Sword was the real deal. Piercing the air, the sword quickly closed in on Lilisha.

“Don’t make me laugh!”

Lilisha was quick to counter, pulling at the space in front of her with Magdala’s claw. In the next moment, Lilisha moved her finger and something strange happened to the Icicle Sword. It froze midair.

“Wha—?!” Tesfia’s eyes shot open wide.

Right before her, the Fable family’s inherited magic had been transformed into a beautiful exhibit on display in a museum.

Anyone with enough talent who was also straining their eyes might have been able to see several threads wrapped around the sword, all stemming from a single thread in front of Lilisha. They’d also see that all of them were carefully tied to the wall.

Unlike normal threads that required a point to wrap around, Lilisha’s thread seemed to grow out of the surface of the wall and the ceiling. They came from all directions and angles to wrap around the sword of ice, not allowing it to budge.

In addition, countless more threads spread across the training grounds like a net. It was a spider's web stretching in all directions.

"I may have gotten this AWR from your family, but this is a competition. And as someone who reports directly to the ruler, I can't lose to a mere student," said Lilisha.

Next, she pulled a string next to her like a harp and Tesfia's Icicle Sword shattered from within.

"What's that? If you're going to give up, you should do so now. I guess I'm not being very mature either...so why don't we call it a draw?" Lilisha kindly offered, wanting to put an end to their pointless battle.

After overwhelming Tesfia with their sheer difference in strength, Lilisha offered her a helping hand with a composed smile. It was a very calculated act, and she glanced over at Alus, who was looking on. She hoped he would act as mediator between her and his disappointing student.

But all Alus did was shrug and gesture with his chin to note her naivety.

Lilisha was the one who had decided their mock battle was just some game between students. But Alus knew Tesfia hated losing. And the harder she was pushed, the more she grew. She might not be formidable, but she was a very annoying opponent.

Lilisha furrowed her brow, trying to understand Alus's reaction. However...

Lilisha instinctively looked back at the redheaded girl she had dismissed as an unworthy foe. The slight chill at her feet made her face stiffen.

The web of mana steel threads should have kept her at a safe distance from Tesfia. It should have been impossible for her to weave her way through the threads and get close to Lilisha.

No matter how fast Tesfia moved, if so much as one of her fingers touched one of the threads, she would take massive damage. Thanks to the training ground's system, that damage would be transformed into an unbearable headache. But even if she could somehow overcome the headache, Lilisha would be warned the moment a thread was touched.

So there was no way that Tesfia should have been there, and yet...

“Tsk!” Lilisha caught a glimpse of a red pigtail in the corner of her eyes. She didn’t know how, but Tesfia had made it all the way in front of her without being sensed.

H-How did she get past the thread...?! she thought.

Now it was Lilisha’s turn to open her eyes wide. The barely visible mana steel threads had at some point been covered in ice and turned into long, thin icicles, robbing them of their original role. Now they were easily visible and couldn’t trap anyone.

This is what Alus’s shrug had meant.

She’d looked down at their mock battle and misjudged Tesfia’s potential. She’d looked down on her and judged her as some spoiled young lady who had never walked a path nearly as harsh as her own.

This unexpected counterattack unnerved Lilisha, and she reflexively took a step back. That’s when she saw the expression on Tesfia’s face.

Her open, unblinking eyes showed extreme concentration. It was hard to believe it was the same Tesfia who had been trash-talking her moments ago. It was as if she had become an empty void.

Lilisha gasped when she heard a crackling sound. Cold air was taking shape into another bright-blue sword, Zepel.

Lilisha wondered when she had cast that spell as she unconsciously poured mana into Magdala to counter the powerful magic before her. The magic formula engraved on the AWR turned reddish-brown like blood had flown into it.

That’s when the mock battle turned serious and the atmosphere became deadly because Lilisha chose to fight back rather than just wait.

“That’s enough.” Both of the girls felt like they heard a low voice right by their ears.

And in fact, they had heard his voice. Alus had slid between them just before Tesfia could close in from her low stance. He held Lilisha’s arm with one hand

and held down Tesfia's forehead with his other.

He looked at her eyes beneath his hand and felt a chill on his hand holding her forehead.

"Ow?!"

Alus curled up his index finger and flicked Tesfia's forehead. Tesfia bent backward a little, but she brought her head forward at twice the speed, the usual liveliness back in her eyes.

"Al! That hurts! I could feel it all the way into my skull!" cried Tesfia.

"Shut up. Try to be more serious when you fight," said Alus.

"What are you talking about?! I was about to win... Hmm?" Tesfia suddenly tilted her head and started vaguely muttering like somebody going through a mystical experience.

She had been manipulating her body and mana using her deep consciousness. At the time, she'd only been vaguely aware of her surroundings due to her extreme focus, but that had now disappeared. Like someone waking up from a dream, the climax of the battle she'd just had was a little vague.

"Whatever. Alice, call the match. It's a draw," said Alus.

Tesfia and Lilisha both objected and complained, but as the referee, Alice had the final say. However, Alice seemed a little out of it and unaware of her surroundings. She didn't seem to understand why Alus had stepped in.

"Huh? Y-yeah, okay."

In the end, Alice nodded at Alus's words; Tesfia frowned, clearly unhappy; and Lilisha pouted.

"Good. It's not like either of you would be satisfied even if you fought to the end." Alus hit them where it hurt, and they shut their mouths.

"All right," Alice said. She took a deep breath before continuing in a lax tone. "This is a draw."

After that, Alice had the two of them make up by shaking hands. And after the two of them reluctantly obeyed, their pointless battle came to an end.

Once that was done, they packed their things and left the training grounds to go home. Of course, Alus ended up escorting them to the girls' dorm.

On the way, Tesfia, Alice, and Lilisha were chatting with each other. It was mostly one trivial topic after another, but they also spoke of the incident with Aferka the other day. The tension between them had dissipated and everyone had returned to normal.

In particular, Lilisha thanked Tesfia and the others for finding her and taking her to the infirmary when she'd been burned. The tips of Tesfia's ears turned red and she hurled some light abuse in return.

While those three made merry, Loki was deep in thought next to Alus. Suddenly she raised her voice.

"That match... She was switching?"

It seemed out of context, but Alus nodded. Loki had finally found the answer to the question she'd had while watching the two fight. Alus gave a light explanation.

"The threads Lilisha used, especially in the latter half of the match, were more like lines than threads. The ones used to stop Tesfia's Icicle Sword by affixing to the walls were abnormally strong. This means she can switch their state between thread and line whenever she wants."

"I thought that she was switching between vibrating and not at first," said Loki.

"That's correct in a sense too, but the thread itself didn't change. She can continually adapt, so it is more correct to think of it as changing states. That's not exactly the essence of it, but it's a good starting point in terms of countering it," explained Alus.

Loki blushed happily at Alus's words.

"Its vibrating state is like a chainsaw, capable of cutting through mana and spells. Meanwhile, the threads can be used for assassinations or traps like Mr. Selva makes. But right now, it's not like every thread can freely change modes. It's probably just the threads from the claw-type AWR that has that special property. Meaning that only her middle finger can create those special

threads.”

“I see. So it’s not something the threads from all of her fingers can do.”

Loki was getting rather passionate and her voice somewhat loud, so Lilisha sent her a sharp glance over her shoulder. She seemed to want to tell them not to pry any further into it, to which Alus smiled wryly and scratched his cheek.

Nobody would be happy to have the tricks up their sleeves exposed, not to mention that she reported directly to the ruler now. Fighting against people was her main job, but she was still a Magicmaster of sorts.

So she wanted to keep the secrets of her abilities from spreading.

“I guess that was insensitive,” he said. “That’s enough of this topic.”

Alus sent a nod in Lilisha’s direction as if apologizing, and Loki likewise lowered her head.

“Yes, I pried too much.”

The Lilisha of the past, who’d proclaimed herself as neither friend nor foe, was no longer here. At the very least she was no longer an enemy. Alus and Loki trusted that.

Suddenly, Lilisha slowed down to split away from Tesfia and Alice and approached Alus and Loki. As if in apology for before, Loki stepped forward, relinquishing her spot next to Alus and changing places with Lilisha.

After a short pause, Lilisha’s slender shoulders shook a little as she broached a new topic.

“I was a little surprised by that,” she started abruptly.

But Alus skillfully picked up on what she meant. She was referring to the mock battle with Tesfia and the unexpected qualities she had shown.

Normally, it was clear that Lilisha, whose abilities outmatched Tesfia’s, would win, especially given their difference in experience fighting people. Yet Tesfia had far exceeded Lilisha’s expectations, almost cornering her. In fact, if Alus hadn’t stepped in...

“I’m surprised too.” And he was. Not at her talents, but at her sudden growth

at the eleventh hour.

“In terms of making an effort she is a genius,” said Alus. “That sort of thing is only natural among Singles, but among students there are very few that could turn experience into ability so quickly. You might have been saved by that AWR of yours.”

“I’d prefer it if you didn’t put it like that. And aren’t you praising Tesfia Fable a lot?” asked Lilisha.

“Hmm? Why are you calling her that? That’s weird,” said Alus.

“Well? I don’t know what else to call her,” said Lilisha.

“You spoke to her casually before.”

“I was just pretending back then, and I was dealing with a careless and carefree noble’s daughter,” Lilisha muttered.

There’d been a big change in how she saw Tesfia. To Alus the change was colossal. Tesfia had just been a superficial friend when Lilisha had been acting, and now that she’d stopped, she was likely as puzzled about Tesfia as Alus had been when he first came to the institute.

That said, Alus didn’t really see a need for Lilisha to change anything. From a philosophical viewpoint, be it friend or best friend, everyone had to act a little bit. No matter how close people were, nobody visited a best friend’s house naked. It was a form of courtesy to show up prepared, not an act.

But while Alus felt that way, he wasn’t very knowledgeable about female friendships, which was why there was no way he could properly resolve Lilisha’s worries. So his answer was blunt.

“Just call her whatever, be it acting or anything else. That’s probably just the way it is, I’m sure.”

Lilisha glanced over at Alus and sighed. “Jeez, I chose the wrong person to consult. If it was going to be like this...”

“That’s a rude way to say it, but no matter. It’s not like you have anyone else to really consult anyways,” said Alus.

“Wha—? Isn’t that even ruder? I-I have people I can talk with too! Like...Lady

Cicelnia?”

Alus’s expression turned bitter the moment that name was brought up. She was a rising star who had just made the list of top three people Alus wanted nothing to do with.

Unaware of that, Lilisha continued, muttering, “And there’s Ms. Rinne?”

“The fact that not a single student comes to mind just tells me how superficial your relationship to people around here was. But I’m sure that Ms. Rinne has gone through plenty of difficulties, so she has plenty of experience,” he casually joked. “By the way...” he began. He had recalled something he wanted to ask. “Speaking of what happened at Cicelnia’s palace, why did you want to save that good-for-nothing brother of yours?” Alus bluntly and rudely asked the girl.

Lilisha had been branded and left at death’s door. Yet at the last moment, she had begged the ruler to spare the mastermind’s life.

Why did she go that far? Why did she want to save the person who’d almost killed her? Alus could understand that Rayleigh would be useful in reorganizing Aferka, but he didn’t think that he was indispensable.

Alus could only glean a single thing from that—Lilisha couldn’t become coldhearted enough to work as an assassin.

But he couldn’t make sense of everything else. And so he sought an answer, as if to supplement something he lacked himself.

“Is it because you’re related?” That was probably wrong, but he decided to hazard a guess.

Lilisha looked beyond the light from the girls’ dorm windows as if trying to look at something far away and shook her head. “I’m not sure. And I don’t know what it is that you want to hear.”

Alus followed her lead and quietly muttered, “I see. Well...I don’t know either.”

It might have manifested as questions for Lilisha, but in reality it was also a mystery to him. Intuitively, Lilisha understood that it wasn’t exactly the answer to his questions that Alus was looking for.

Alus had no relatives. At least nobody he was related to by blood. He did have Berwick and Vizaist as political associates and allies, but there was nobody with an inseparable bond. So he wanted to know what it was that drove Lilisha to go that far.

Lilisha fell silent for a while but eventually spoke. "Rayleigh is only my half brother. And I wasn't very sad when Gill was banished. But...I do have some vague memories that I'm not sure are real of being doted on when I was small. So I think my brother had a side like that to him in the past. I'm sure he also felt the pressure of having to lead the five families of Rimfuge."

Even as she recalled an old memory, Lilisha spoke as if she were recounting an anecdote of a historical figure that had nothing to do with her. If it had been winter, her voice would have melted away with the white breath she exhaled.

"So sorry, but I don't really know the answer myself. But there is something that I have decided on. And that is that I will contain the turmoil that is happening in Aferka and Rimfuge, although I'm sure that it will be difficult for just me alone," Lilisha said self-deprecatingly and smiled happily.

Alus didn't offer a reply, just maintained his silence.

Unsure of how to interpret his attitude, Lilisha continued, "Before coming to the Institute, I did plenty of research on you. So from both that data as well as from our short relationship, I can kind of tell that you want to think there was something logical behind my decision. Like I had found something to be gained, right? Then you would be able to enjoy some peace of mind. I'm pretty sure I understand that part of you correctly... I'm pretty sure the Alus Reigin I used to know wouldn't have saved me. Does that give you an answer?"

"I'm not sure." He didn't want to admit it, but what Lilisha had said did hit home. But he wasn't happy about it.

"You like to contemplate things. And you also want explanations. You believe that there is some factor at play, whether you like it or not," said Lilisha.

She looked up to the night sky and then lowered her head as if nodding before turning her gaze to Alus. "But that is unexpectedly romantic," she muttered.

Alus felt like there was a mysterious charm to her voice that he was incapable of understanding. But he couldn't leave her words unchecked and spoke with a surly look.

"I didn't ask for that much," he said. "At most I just wanted to hear about it if I got the chance someday. If you ever remembered, that is, even if it was years down the road."

"Then asking now was the right choice, wasn't it? Or would you rather be discontent for years to come?"

The slight hint of sarcasm in her words caused a wrinkle to appear between Alus's brows and he was unusually peeved. It was a trivial question that she would likely forget about in a few minutes of time.

"Well, no matter. Perhaps I just wanted to ask someone, and that being you was ideal," he said.

Lilisha walked ahead without changing her gait...but after the third step she spoke up. "I would be lying if I said that emotions weren't involved. What I said to Lady Cicelnia at that time was full of calculations, but it was the only persuasive material that I could offer. Can I tell you something very convenient?"

"Go ahead," Alus said, acting like a third party completely unrelated to the incident or Lilisha.

"I think that my brother wanted to free someone from Aferka," said Lilisha.

"Who?" asked Alus.

"Me," Lilisha said and turned around, pointing at herself without much confidence.

"That's definitely a convenient tale. You're still claiming that after everything he did?" asked Alus.

Lilisha smiled wryly, despite Alus's biting remark, and then turned forward again. Clasp ing her hands together behind her back, she continued walking, her pace steady. In fact, her steps even appeared to be lighter, as if a weight had dropped from her shoulders. She had found a point of compromise within

herself that would never be lost.

“It was certainly my brother who ordered the reckless assassination on Mr. Selva. So maybe I’m contradicting myself. But when we met again in the palace, my brother said with pity in his voice that the weak have their own way of living. That was when it hit me,” Lilisha quietly continued. “Besides, the critical failure of the mission was more than enough reason to exile me. Meaning that by cutting me off from my home, I got the chance to break away from our karma. In that case—”

“But what would any of that sentiment mean if you had been killed by Mr. Selva before that?” Alus argued, unable to accept her answer.

Lilisha just shook her head.

“As you might know, my teacher, Mrs. Miltria, is a former commander of Aferka just like Mr. Selva. And as Aferka’s consultant, she was against purging Mr. Selva. There seems to be a complicated history between them. At the very least, I’m sure Mr. Selva didn’t have a grudge against my teacher...not then and not now. And I’m her disciple. I’m sure Mr. Selva was able to see as much from my movements and techniques too.”

Some of that did add up to what Alus had seen. He had seen Selva observing the techniques Lilisha had used with her mana steel threads. With their gap in ability, he could have eliminated Lilisha whenever he wanted, so it made sense to assume that he had seen the presence of Lilisha’s teacher in her moves.

“I see. So you want to say that Mr. Selva had no intentions of killing you then?”

“It’s just a possibility.”

“Still...it’s very naive. If anything had gone different, you would have been dead. There’s no guarantee that Rayleigh anticipated that much.”

“Yes. It’s possible that he was seriously sending me on a mission to die,” said Lilisha. “But humans can be contradictory at times...and I felt that my brother was very human when we spoke at the palace. Not that I really understand it myself.”

“I really don’t get you,” Alus said with a sigh. “In fact, you seem

extraordinarily carefree. Are you sure you're going to be fine leading a unit that reports directly to the ruler like that? You're way too unreliable."

"I'm sensible enough to understand that I'm saying something stupid. That's why I'm not excusing it. Just think of it as being partial to my family," said Lilisha.

One side was trying to kill her while the other pitied her. Having fought Rayleigh himself, Alus couldn't imagine that the man would have such contradictory feelings. But if there was such a thing as feelings for family that were heavily entangled, complicated, and contradictory, then Alus with his lack of family had no way of knowing. So when Lilisha brought that up, Alus had no way of fighting back, and he just scratched his head instead.

"All right. So you're saying that's why you saved your brother?" he asked after a pause.

Lilisha shook her head at Alus's question.

"Hmm, I don't really understand it myself. I didn't really think that hard about it myself back then. But my dying brother looked like he had been freed from a weight. And I thought that this is how a person who wants to die looks. For the first time in such a long time...it looked like the haze had left my brother's eyes."

"So he was planning to die," said Alus. "Well, since he came at me back then, he probably understood that would be the outcome too. Maybe that's something only you siblings understand."

"I'm sure that's because he was fighting you," said Lilisha. "I believe that was the first time my brother could unleash all of his power yet still face death. Maybe he wanted it to be done by the hands of Alpha's rank 1. Besides, there wasn't anyone in Aferka who could fight my brother on even ground. Did you know as noble assassins, Rimfuge has their own magical techniques?"

"You mean like some kind of inherited magic?" asked Alus.

"It's nothing on that level, but it's never allowed to leave the family. The Rimfuge family has been researching the limiter theory. It's a requirement to learn for anyone who wants to join Aferka and make their way to the top."

“I see. So what is it all about, then?” asked Alus. “Rayleigh may have used some strange moves, but nothing that corresponded to some unknown theories. That’s why I was able to get a grasp of his tactics and principles.”

As someone in pursuit of magic, Alus was interested, but Lilisha only smiled.

“Honestly, I don’t really know myself. A failure like me would never be told the details. I was pretty much only let into Aferka because I was my brother’s little sister. Perhaps it was just jargon, but some called it Fortitude. It seems like it’s a different use for the curse mark. And my brother chose not to use that top secret technique against you. However, that’s all I can say.”

Lilisha gave him a meaningful glance, as if to tell him to guess. Alus received the message loud and clear and fell silent.

He could see what she meant and it made sense to him. Rayleigh had been serious, but he hadn’t used all of the cards in his hand.

Perhaps he had been planning to take that secret with him to the grave, alongside the old Aferka. He had avoided using the secret technique in their battle because it had been brought about by Aferka.

Instead, he’d used only techniques and powers he had developed for himself.

Alus was exasperated by how awkwardly and stubbornly both these siblings pushed forward with their will.

“How was that?” asked Lilisha.

Alus was at a loss for a response to that. In fact, he wasn’t even sure how serious he was about getting an answer.

“Heh heh. Were you expecting something like a tearjerker with siblings who trusted each other no matter what and would save one another from any danger?” Lilisha peeked at Alus’s face and spoke in a teasing tone.

Not wanting to be annoyed by that expression, Alus only glanced at her for a moment before turning his eyes away, settling for keeping some of her golden hair in the corner of his eye.

She sounded playful, but Lilisha probably didn’t properly understand the reason for her actions either. People’s minds are subtle and complex, and it

would be incredibly unrefined and tactless to try and drag them all out and analyze them side by side.

So in the end, Alus understood that her choice and the results of her actions were everything.



At the same time, he felt like he'd gotten a clearer picture of what he himself was lacking. By the time he came to this realization, they were already at the girls' dorm.

As Lilisha reached the door, she turned around to Alus.

"Besides, when it comes to saving someone or not, you're the same, you know. Who was it that arrived at the Fable family estate and stood between me and Mr. Selva?" Lilisha suggestively asked, and a smile bloomed on her face...followed quickly by her cheeks flushing red and her looking away. "Well then," she said and held her license over the gate.

Without turning back again, she followed Alice and Tesfia into the girls' dorm, her steps rapping in a joyful beat. Alus looked a little discouraged, but soon smiled.

"Hmph, make sure you learn how to make good use of that AWR," he called out to her back. Lilisha held up a hand and waved before fully disappearing into the dorms.

After that, days passed peacefully by.

Once back in the Institute, Alus and the others lived the lives of students. Alus had grown accustomed to listening to boring lectures and hearing students ranting and raving about selfish demands and complaints.

In his laboratory, he was finally getting to work on the various projects he'd left unfinished. He could once again go back to his research-intensive unhealthy lifestyle. This was the kind of crippling freedom that Alus was fortunate to have, even though he hadn't particularly asked for it himself.

Those leisurely days passed by, and the end of the first year of the Institute was coming into view.

Tranquility set in as night fell. In the silence that filled the cradle that held the seven nations, only the auto-tuning system quietly continued to work, adjusting the external temperature and other details.



"There's a lot of things I'd like to respond to; I'm allowed to be mad, right?"

One night a few days before the end of the year, Lilisha unhappily furrowed her brows in Alus's laboratory.

"Huh? It's the end of the year, so the least we can do is do a major cleanup in Al's laboratory, don't you think? Well, Loki usually cleans up every day," Tesfia said with a blank face.

Alice continued with a smile. "Well, that's pretty much just an excuse."

"I can accept that. And I am grateful for everything Alus has done. But...how did it turn into this?" Lilisha frowned and complained.

Lilisha looked at the table for four in front of her. Loki was bringing out one lavish dish after another from the menu she had started working on in the morning. Loki had put her all into this. The walls were decorated and an extra chair had even been brought out for Lilisha.

"I-If you had said that it was to celebrate my appointment as the new commander of Aferka, I wouldn't have gotten mad either! But is there no concept of keeping secrets concerning Alpha in this room?!" said Lilisha.

"Don't complain to me. If you have anything to say, take it up with that redhead and the goofily smiling Alice," said Alus.

"Eh?!" Alice was shocked by the casual treatment, and Tesfia spoke in her place.

"It's fine, isn't it? Also, I did want to invite Feli too, but she wasn't at the dorm."

"Well, Feli is the kind who would come if invited," said Alus, "so she probably had some other business to attend to. Besides, I'm just offering a place to hold it."

"Maybe she wasn't very thrilled about it since it was in celebration of Lilisha's appointment," Tesfia rudely pointed out, shaking her head.

Lilisha shot up from her chair in response. "That's what I wanted to talk about! Why does everyone know about my appointment?!" she asked.

"Al told us," answered Tesfia.

Lilisha's sharp glare turned directly to Alus. "I thought so. What was that

about not complaining to you?”

Sensing his disadvantage, Alus took a drink of juice in an attempt to escape her piercing gaze. He feigned ignorance as he quenched his parched throat.

Loki chose that moment to put a wooden salad bowl down on the edge of the table and picked up a plate instead.

“It was bound to come out eventually. Besides, Sir Alus played a part in your appointment,” Loki casually said as she served the salad in a familiar manner.

“Naturally,” the spotter said, “the Fable family has their own intelligence network. So it really would have only been a matter of time until Ms. Tesfia found out. Besides, we need you to stay on our side until the Tenbram is over, Ms. Lilisha.”

Because Alus had helped resolve Aferka’s problems, Lilisha’s neutral position had collapsed. But it would be difficult for Womruina to point that out since they had helped Aferka out, and that would mean admitting to helping in the plot to assassinate the ruler and making an attempt on the life of a servant in one of the three great noble families.

So they might instead demand that another judge be added. Then they could add a judge that was under their thumb.

Lilisha sulked and planted her elbows on the table before resting her head in her hands.

“I obviously want to pay back my debt too, but at least make sure it doesn’t spread through the campus, okay,” said Lilisha.

“Do you really need to worry about that?” asked Loki. “After all, Sir Alus’s ranking has been kept hidden so far. Although those two found out.”

“Rank aside, it’s pretty much impossible to hide how amazing he is. It’s only a matter of time until the truth comes to light,” Lilisha sharply retorted, and Alus, Tesfia, and Alice all twitched.

When Alus’s ranking had almost been exposed, it had been Lilisha who had smoothed things over so that only his affiliation to the military had been revealed. He was believed to be working part-time for them because of his

ability, but the real truth of his rank had been kept secret thanks to Lilisha.

Once she finished serving salad to everyone, Loki finally took off her apron. After she took a seat, everyone picked up their cup of juice.

“Wh-What?! Can you not exaggerate this please?!” begged Lilisha.

As if to drown out her objection, Tesfia raised her cup up high. “To Lilisha’s commander appointment!”

Alus sarcastically added, “To her great promotion.”

As he wasn’t very used to this kind of atmosphere, he had no choice but to go with the flow. Alice and Loki raised their cups as well, and eventually a flurried Lilisha, being a wuss, crumpled under pressure and raised hers too.

After that, the group had a festive meal, and while they chatted the lined-up dishes shrank. Loki had made most of the food, but Alice had made one or two items herself. They shared food and exchanged opinions on them, and for this moment, they got to live a typical student life.

Typically, Alus ate his meals alone and in silence, so he struggled to adapt to this. While he did regularly have meals with Loki and had experience with cafeterias at the Institute or in the military, at home it felt somewhat different. Because of how he’d grown up, he just still couldn’t get used to it.

For the same reason, he couldn’t keep up with the girls and their constantly changing topics. He was impressed Loki could. Lilisha had originally been acting at the Institute, but she was blending in quite well too. But for Alus to feel like he could join the group, he would need to charge in with talk of his specialties of magic or AWRs.

However, he wasn’t tactless enough to bring up such violent topics when they were talking about more mundane things. In the end, he felt fed up at himself for being more comfortable in the military.

Once the group finished the food, they all took a little break, having eaten a little too much. Then, in a display of camaraderie, Loki and Alice stood up and worked together to take the plates to the kitchen. Tesfia watched them while doing nothing and wearing a slovenly smile. She happily muttered, “Phew, it’s been a while since I ate this much.”

Throughout the meal, Tesfia had been blissfully unconcerned about appearance or propriety, stuffing her face with food, raving about how tasty it was, and rubbing her stomach in satisfaction afterwards. In stark contrast, Lilisha had maintained perfect and polite manners during the meal. So nobody could blame her for the sideways glance she gave Tesfia now.

She turned to Alus, who looked equally dismayed albeit for a different reason. “This is my first time at this kind of dinner party, but...” she started.

“Don’t say anything. You’ll get used to it eventually,” Alus said, stopping Lilisha from saying any more. He already knew that it would be a losing fight. The problem was not so much with Tesfia’s upbringing as it was her roommate, Alice, spoiling her.

As tea was brought in, Lilisha finally shook her head in resignation and spoke to Alus in a quiet voice. “But are you sure that I should be here? Did I make you feel uncomfortable?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “They just wanted an excuse to party. I just hope we can move on to next year without anything else happening.”

Lilisha brought her cup to her mouth and quenched her thirst. “I can agree with that...but in my case, I will be swamped with work and won’t have much time for lectures. At least it will be treated as official business.”

“You’ve already talked it out with the principal, haven’t you?”

Lilisha nodded at his question. “Yes, so I’m not particularly worried about the academic side.”

Her expression clouded as she thought about the practical side of her studies. She would be fine in typical lectures, but her magical skills did not meet the standards of the Second Magical Institute. However, since Sisty had a hand in the commotion that had happened, she would be “abusing her authority” to back her up.

Alus laughed off her worries like it was something trivial. “Instead of worrying about every single thing you’re not good at, develop your strengths to make up for it. If you only worry about the details, you’ll end up taking the safe path until the end.”

“You’re not going to tell me that?” demanded Tesfia, suddenly barging in and frowning at Alus’s words.

“It’s a matter of difference in character,” he responded.

“At the very least, I have ladylike manners and no problems with the general education...unlike a certain Ms. Tesfia Fable,” said Lilisha.

Alus and Lilisha both gave the redheaded girl a cold look. When it came to regular lectures, Lilisha was receiving special education for the gifted, so there wasn’t much to worry about there. But unexpectedly, Tesfia didn’t fall for the provocation and instead looked surprised.

“Huh, what are you saying?” she asked.

When Lilisha realized the girl’s question was not in response to her provocative attitude but to her use of Tesfia’s full name, her cheeks turned a little red. Alus decided to pretend he didn’t see anything. It wasn’t usual for a friendship to bud after a fight, but Lilisha was clumsily stumbling on the first step of that classic pattern.

Before she could start making excuses, Tesfia spoke up. “You can call me Tesfia, or Fia, or whatever you like.”

“I-I know that. But don’t think I have any intentions of getting close to you...Tesfia!” said Lilisha.

“That goes for me too! Next time I’ll win,” said Tesfia.

Hearing that, Alus looked a little surprised. It seemed that Tesfia understood her own defeat. They may have called it a draw to settle things peacefully, but it seemed she had different feelings on the matter.

That said, Lilisha’s AWR had been the dominating factor in their match. From what Alus could see, the AWR’s properties perfectly matched her style, and that had played a big part. Tesfia had also grown at a remarkable rate, but the longer the match had dragged on, the worse things had gone for her.

As this exchange was ending, Loki and Alice returned from the kitchen, carrying small plates and a cake. They set them down on the table. Alus’s cheek twitched at the sight since he wasn’t fond of desserts. But the girls, who he was

sure couldn't eat anything other than sweets, were completely charmed by the cake and dug in as soon as it was sliced.

"Wow! Is this homemade?" asked Tesfia.

"Of course not. I bought it. But I can guarantee that it tastes good," said Loki.

"It really is delicious," Lilisha exclaimed to Loki after taking a bite.

Loki had considerately placed a much thinner slice in front of Alus as well. He couldn't go without eating a single bite, so he resigned himself to his fate and took a sip of tea first to reset his tongue. While he felt like the girls would enjoy anything sweet, Alus's concept of sweetness was nothing short of naive. He ended up tossing the cake into his mouth and swallowing it quickly to dispose of it. Between him and, mostly, the four girls, the cake disappeared in no time at all, and they finally took a breather.

"By the way...what is the new Aferka supposed to do for the ruler?" Tesfia abruptly asked. Alice also leaned in, showing some interest.

"It will be like a kind of royal guard..." Lilisha kept her description vague.

Because of Aferka's position, they couldn't really be openly given missions. In that sense, she was in a similar position to Alus. Besides, the ruler already had a form of royal guard. However, they were just a derivation of the palace garrison, and there was a limit to the missions and authority that could be given to them. But since the relationship between the past Aferka and the previous ruler had ended, the ruler hadn't had a private army under her direct control.

Fortunately, Alus had what it took to join this conversation. "This is the first time since Cicelnia took over that the ruler has clearly been at the top of a squad's chain of command," he said.

"Yes, I believe that's because Ms. Rinne was accompanying her for diplomatic meetings and conferences," said Lilisha.

"Talk about careless. I'm surprised she hasn't been attacked until now," said Alus.

"Y-Yes," Lilisha replied hesitantly, feeling guilty about her brother's actions.

"Outwardly, she does have a Single serving as a guard of honor," Alus added,

noting that typically it was only customary to bring a Single to the ruler conference.

Loki followed up and spoke of the importance of Single Digit Magicmasters. “Outwardly, that is. In reality a precious asset won’t be allowed to waste time in the Inner World. They are just too valuable in the Outer World.”

Lilisha could only sigh and agree. “Of course. Frankly, I’ve heard that in a political setting, showing off by having a Single accompany you is a matter of national prestige.”

Having been in the military, Loki had seen her fair share of how politics affected them. “I have no doubts about that. Prolonged absence of a Single will lead to more deaths in the Outer World, and I’m sure the military brings that up in their complaints as well,” she said.

Both Tesfia and Alice felt left out when politics were brought up, but the redheaded girl suddenly interjected with a question. “You mean that Lilisha will be sticking with the ruler and even go outside of the nation?”

“Who knows? It seems that I will probably remain a student for a while longer at least,” said Lilisha in an uncertain tone, glancing over at Alus.

“So the observation mission will continue for the time being,” Alus muttered.

“Yes. But not in any negative sense. It’s partially for appearances for the military and also because Lady Cicelnia wishes for it. Well, the military can be pretty flexible by allowing a job on the side,” said Lilisha.

Lilisha had unusual and special circumstances. She had to handle a unit directly under the ruler’s control while also working for the military. This was a special exception just for her.

Alus sighed and looked up at the familiar ceiling. “Talk about VIP treatment, but I don’t really want to hear about it.”

When he looked at the time, he saw that it was almost time for the girls’ dorm curfew, so it was time to go home. But as they’d just finished eating, he couldn’t exactly throw them out. So they all ended up having some tea. In fact, they were getting more and more relaxed, and it looked like nobody was going home.

At the moment, they were talking about the test that was coming up. Gloom hung in the air, but Alus wasn't particularly worried about losing credits. Sisty owed him, and Alus would easily pass a test if he got a little serious. As such, he was immune to a typical student's worries, but that didn't apply to everyone else.

"The test is important, but you have the Tenbram too, right, Fia? Isn't that more important?" Alice asked, seemingly more worried than the person in question.

Everyone had known someone would bring up this topic eventually. Depending on the outcome, Tesfia might end up leaving the Institute, so it was on everyone's mind to some degree. However, no amount of thinking would lift the fog of anxiety. The endless seeds of worry had no end in sight.

"Alice, don't worry so much. You'll just end up exhausting yourself. Besides, if your test is too bad, you might end up repeating a year. Start by focusing on what's next and do your best," said Alus.

Alice listened to that, her eyes cast down while she played with her cup. "Y-Yeah..."

"It's okay, Alice. No matter what's coming we just have to overcome it. I'm more worried about the test," Tesfia said and playfully leaned against Alice.

"Ah...!" Some of the tea in Alice's cup spilled over thanks to Tesfia's nudge.

"Ah, sorry."

"Oh, Fia. You didn't get any on your clothes, did you, Lilisha? There's no stains, are there?" asked Alice.

"Thank you, but I'm fine. Some drops fell on my hand," said Tesfia as Alice stood up and used a napkin to wipe Tesfia's hand and the top of the table. "Aha ha, I guess I overdid it," she said with remorse and bowed to Lilisha with an affectionate smile.

"You didn't get burned, did you?" asked Alice.

"I'm fine, there's no need to exaggerate. There's nothing to worry about. Still..." Lilisha let out a heavy sigh.

Tesfia and Alice looked puzzled, and Lilisha had been looking for an opportunity to speak up, but she made it seem like a hassle. “Oh fine, this is still not confirmed, but I’ll tell you this.”

Alus started paying attention as well. After all, Lilisha had already begun working for Aferka under the direct control of the ruler. She had talked about uniting the five families, but it was safe to assume that the reborn Aferka had already been functioning before Lilisha was appointed as commander.

And there was the matter of the strange impatience that Alus had sensed from Cicelnia. She seemed in such a hurry to gain power that she needed to forcibly get Alus involved. Perhaps that was why she had to incorporate Aferka in such a way too.

Although it’s probably too late to think about that now, thought Alus.

Alus had learned one main thing from this incident that tied directly to his research. The main focus of his research was what Magicmasters should be. This included how to increase the overall level of Magicmasters, how to improve the health of the Magicmaster world, and how they worked in regard to political issues. All of these issues were currently becoming clear.

Whenever something came up, Cicelnia and the Governor-General relied on him, and his very presence defined the nation of Alpha. And the reason for that was his overwhelming power and the overall quality of Magicmasters in general.

Even though the fundamental problem of a lack of personnel was unresolvable, Alus felt that the quality of Alpha’s Magicmasters was too low. He thought of it like the human body: if the blood vessels at the end of the body were thin and frail, the strain on the heart to pump the blood became bigger. Him being caught up in this latest incident was a great example of that.

Cicelnia had easily seen Rayleigh’s revolt coming, but Alus was the only one who could stop him. Lettie was left to deal with the Outer World completely on her own, and her explosions would no doubt cause further harm. Moreover, Alus felt that if they tried to force her into doing something she wasn’t good at, they would run the risk of losing a precious Single Digit Magicmaster.

At any rate, it was clear that Cicelnia had taken the risk of restructuring Aferka

because she needed their power. That was why she couldn't help but wish that Alus was hers.

Alus returned to reality as Lilisha started to explain in a hushed tone: "The Frusevan family will be the referee for the Tenbram. It seems Alus specifically wants me in the role, and I think I can do something about that. But that is only if the Tenbram is actually held."

"What does that mean?" asked Alus.

"You know that Womruina was backing Aferka, right?" asked Lilisha.

Rayleigh's attempt on Cicelnia had been part of a planned coup. The plan had been for Womruina to take her place. Alus had heard of the secret connection between Womruina and Aferka from Cicelnia, and Lilisha was now backing her up.

But according to Rayleigh, that had simply been an alignment of interests, and they'd only received simple support. The agreement had been that Aferka would be allowed to continue to exist if the position of ruler was given to Womruina. But that had been as much as Rayleigh had known. Perhaps it was the fact that they couldn't trust one another that allowed them to make a secret agreement.

"We're looking into them right now, and they're preeetty shady," said Lilisha. "I have something of a background in intelligence-gathering myself. Well, anyways, all sorts of proof came to light. Frankly, it isn't really the time for Tenbram."

"So it's that bad," replied Alus, thinking of the dirty trick regarding the engagement with Tesfia. It was the kind of thing they could pull. Lilisha was going to get very busy.

She continued in an exhausted tone, "Yes, they've gone too far, even for former royalty. They're rotten to the core. Have you heard about Ambrosia?"

Only Alus reacted to that name. Not even Loki had heard of it. Tesfia and Alice asked questions, having not heard the name before.

"What's that, some food?"

“Is it the name of some flower?”

“It’s an illegal drug,” Alus explained. “When it comes to drugs, there’s a lot of Chemical Boost on the market.”

Lilisha continued by explaining further, “It’s a highly addictive drug for Magicmasters. To put it bluntly, it’s a high-performing mana stimulant. Because of that, it has some nasty side effects.”

“That was banned at the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament, wasn’t it? It’s some sort of doping, right?” Tesfia correctly asserted.

It was, in fact, similar to doping in sports. In the past, Loki had used a forbidden core to replenish mana and used a spell too great for her. In a broad sense, this was the same.

“Chemical Boost is certainly a form of doping. It’s an illegal drug in pill form. And at a student level, there is a notable difference in performance between those who use it and those who don’t. It’s highly addictive, but people can handle using it once. However, it puts a lot of strain on the mana-generating organ, so continued use will lead to major organ damage,” said Alus, speaking with knowledge of the detestable drug.

While it was a sweet temptation to those who had been unable to continue to polish themselves through hard work, it was foolish to risk your body and future for the sake of a tournament at the student level.

“I’ve heard it’s a problem in other nations too.” But that was all Alus knew. He wasn’t part of the intelligence department, and he didn’t have a grasp of all of the different illegal drugs in circulation.

Lilisha nodded and continued after him. “It can be manufactured for cheap, and an inferior version comes in powder form. Even individuals can easily make it if they feel like it. Not that the recipe is that easy to get a hold of. Well, when it comes to Chemical Boost, things are going back and forth. Even if dealers are disposed of steadily, with the security forces and civil police only doing the occasional bust, there’s no end to them.”

When they took down one production base, another would appear elsewhere in its place, so the situation showed no signs of changing.

Seeing where the conversation was going, Loki interjected, “So Ambrosia is a high-end version of Chemical Boost, then? And now dark rumors around it have risen to the point of becoming impossible to ignore, right? If I may ask, how effective is it?”

Alus answered the question. “As far as I know, it is at least ten times as strong as Chemical Boost.”

Tesfia said nothing, but Alice exclaimed, “Ten times?!”

It wasn’t just Loki who was surprised about that; Tesfia and Alice looked equally shocked.

“Of course, that means that the mana-generating organ is being abused, and the damage to the body is on a higher level than just doping. But I honestly can’t imagine how much power it can bring out,” said Alus.

“Yes, the damage from the side effects can be severe. Sensory organs will even start failing. I haven’t seen anyone directly affected by the side effects, but after analyzing the Ambrosia we seized, even the ingredients we’ve figured out are known to be extremely harmful. So it’s a term you won’t hear unless you’re in that type of investigation,” said Lilisha.

Alus didn’t overlook Lilisha’s ambiguous statement. “Isn’t Ambrosia just a concentrated form of Chemical Boost?”

Lilisha closed her mouth to moisten her lips for a moment, a deep anxiety in her eyes. “No, it’s not. That might have been the case before. But the Ambrosia we’ve seen is a completely different breed. What we seized might just be a trial product. There’s a lot of things we don’t know about it, even after looking at its list of ingredients.”

That was strange. They’d analyzed it enough to create a list of ingredients, yet they didn’t understand the key details.

“Even though we’ve analyzed the ingredients, some of them we can’t identify. Well, I’m not a specialist, so I can’t say that ‘ingredients’ is the right term,” said Lilisha.

“I see,” Alus said with interest. He’d heard what he wanted to hear and had no intention of meddling with her new job.

Lilisha furrowed her brows. “More importantly...” she said to return them to their original topic, “Seedy evidence like that came up around Aile, or rather the Womruina family.”

“Is that for certain?” asked Alus.

“Yes, but considering their status, the military can’t get involved,” explained Lilisha. “And it’d be difficult for the security forces or civilian police to make a move. Our investigation has only just begun too. Considering the background that has allowed the family to survive until today, they’re obviously not clean, but the cover-up is very elaborate.”

It seemed Womruina’s poisonous fangs had bitten Alpha deeper than anyone had imagined. Aile’s confident behavior and arrogant attitude was backed up by that tremendous power. But now that the ruler knew they had been supporting Aferka, not even the great noble family could be at peace.

As if she knew exactly what Alus was thinking, Lilisha spoke up. “However, I’m sure that there is a commotion in Womruina right now.” She planted her elbows on the table and wagged her fingers as she snickered and continued. “That’s why the date for the Tenbram still hasn’t been announced. At the very least, it won’t happen soon.”

Obvious relief washed over Tesfia when she heard that. She’d been resolved to face it, but she wanted to avoid it if she could. Above all, the fact that the Womruina family was having difficulties made her feel satisfied. But her cheer and attempt to high-five Alice seemed to take it a little too far.

“That means that there’s no need to buy time to get some leeway. I just hope you can master your new spell before the time runs out,” Alus muttered.

Tesfia excitedly proclaimed, “Now I can focus on my training.”

Whatever the case...

“If you could crush them, or at least stir things up, that would be a huge help to me,” said Tesfia.

“If only it were that easy. A cornered rat will fight back. And that family is home to something worse than rats. They are fallen royalty. Lions dirty with black blood.” Lilisha finished off the last of her tea and said her thanks.

“Anyways, there’s no problem as long as their focus isn’t here.”

“She’s right, Sir Alus. There’s no need to go through the trouble of sticking your neck out any further. You can finally catch your breath!” Loki happily exclaimed, but her ulterior motives were clear. She was being unnaturally pushy about Alus taking this chance to recuperate both mentally and physically.

However, Alus ignored her intentions, and the edges of his lips curled up. “You’re right. Now I can get through the research that’s been piling up. I’m going to get busy.”

The faces of the people around the table were aghast at Alus’s enthusiasm.

Seventy-Ninth Chapter

Invisible Resident

Even though human civilization had been reduced to seven nations, not everyone enjoyed a prosperous life. There was a place far away from the urban areas that had a melancholic feel to it. It was located in a remote area in the middle of Alpha. And it was home to people who had fallen on hard times or been exiled from their communities.

The barely remaining benefits of civilization here were completely different from urban areas. These areas were poor. There were no noble mansions in sight and the fields went on without end, but there were the occasional antiquated production facilities along the agricultural roads. Wooden houses with inconsistent appearances were scattered here and there, and the people still lived old-fashioned lives.

Ironically, the world being overrun with Fiends had brought back the good old lands of humankind.

This area was isolated from the urban areas where all kinds of cultures mixed and seemingly rejected development. Surrounded by trees, villages gave a closed and isolated feel. But they also called to mind a sense of nostalgia, as if they were hiding places for those who had escaped from the mundane world depicted in paintings.

When night had fallen on one such village, the sound of gravel echoed all around no matter how carefully the travelers moved. Those rough footsteps seemed to assert that there was no need for the refined etiquette of nobles here.

Only moonlight lit up the village. But if the artificial moon were to be covered by clouds generated on the whim of the weather device, the village would fall into complete darkness. A single figure was moving at brisk pace on a small road. There was not even a Circle Port set up in a place this remote, and even if

she ran at full speed, it would take her over an hour to get to the closest one.

What do I do? I can't believe I can't reach them at a time like this. It's a real pinch, but haven't they noticed? thought Felinella. She could see pretty well in the dark, but she didn't enjoy the idea of walking down a dark road alone.

The only saving grace was that if she was going to be attacked, it would be by a human. A remote rural area or not, any wild dogs or poisonous snakes could be dealt with using magic. But the night felt different in the village. Felinella was used to the noble life in the city, but the night was deep and instinctively frightened her.

As if trying to dispel her fear, she gently brushed her long hair hanging down over her ample chest. Even such a gesture exuded the refinement and elegance of a sophisticated woman and made her stand out even more beneath the moonlight.

"This is the place..." she muttered as she eventually reached what looked like a private home. It was built away from the rest of the wooden houses, and a single orange light leaked out from inside.

The girl stood at the front door of the desolate house. Suddenly, the presence she faintly sensed inside disappeared...and her surroundings fell dead silent. It was an artificial silence in deliberate response to the visitor.

Speaking of, we never did decide on a signal. What should I do, the girl thought with a mischievous smile. Changing her tone of voice, she put a hand on her throat and strained her voice. "Oh dear...how many times do I have to tell you? If you don't need dinner, you need to tell me in advance."

Suddenly, the sound of hurried footsteps came from inside and the door swung open.

"Felinella, stop that!" Appearing from the other side was the girl's father, Vizaist, looking furious. He was the head of the Socalent family, one of the three great noble families, and a leading figure in the military.

He had high combat capabilities and a large frame, was in the prime of his life, and his mind and body were of sound health. But even this man, the fierce leader of Alpha's intelligence department, was no match for his beautiful

daughter, who welcomed him with open arms.

Felinella's words just now were like a magical phrase that forced a conditioned response from her father. With a big smile on her face, Felinella responded, "Then please do leave me with a means of communication, father."

As Vizaist groaned, the other members of the intelligence department had soundlessly appeared behind him to observe the farce. His five subordinates all looked exasperated, but watched their leader and his beautiful daughter with gentle eyes.

"Ahem... Anyways, come in," Vizaist cleared his throat and said. In response, Felinella slid into the temporary base of operations that the intelligence department had prepared. The inside was just like any normal house. It had a bare minimum of furniture to show that it was lived in. A rusty kettle and the like added an air of elaborate disguise. Fire in the fireplace was keeping the house warm and bright.

After the previous owner had passed away, the intelligence department had bought the house, furniture and all. Of course, they couldn't let the expense show on any records, so they bought it through another person. Incidentally, aside from Vizaist, the members were dressed like civilians to keep their identities hidden.



“If you suddenly go into hiding without notifying me, I won’t know where to find you, father,” Felinella said in quiet anger.

“I was just about to go back to exchange information,” Vizaist said, making excuses as he handed her an aluminum cup of steaming instant coffee. “Well, just sit down wherever.”

Four desks were pushed together inside the room, with various materials scattered across them. In front of them was a large stack of papers that appeared to be a compilation of information.

They may have seemed old-fashioned, but for espionage activities, such methods could be more convenient. Unlike the standard recording media, paper could be burned, or swallowed, or destroyed in other various ways.

Felinella drank the coffee, warming up her chilled body. Vizaist wasn’t the only one who wanted to exchange information. Straightening her seated posture, Felinella began speaking in a balanced tone.

“I saw how the incident with Mr. Alus was settled. The leader of Aferka, Rayleigh Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan, attempted a coup and has now lost his position. After that, it was announced that Aferka would be reorganized as an honor guard reporting directly to the ruler under leadership of the youngest Frusevan sibling, Lilisha Ron de Rimfuge Frusevan,” Felinella reported, and Vizaist listened without any particular surprise.

“Honor guard, is it? It seems the ruler crossed a dangerous bridge. I’m amazed that Berwick would go along with such a risky gamble.” Vizaist sat down on a chair made of rough wood and stroked his beard. “Ah, Berwick sent the Frusevan daughter to the Institute. He comes up with some dirty tricks. He understands Alus well, or perhaps he doesn’t understand him at all...” Vizaist said with a frown and snort, clearly not amused.

“However, this time the principal...Sisty Nexophia’s cooperation was acquired. So I’m sure she will prevent rumors among nobility about the problems around Mr. Alus from being spread for some time,” said Felinella.

This time, Vizaist slapped the table in amusement. “Ha ha, that is good news. Berwick has been messing around too much. And Sisty has a grasp of his

weakness. Just counting how much he owes is enough to make one sick and tired of it. If Sisty has been dragged into it, that's all the more of a debt Berwick will have incurred."

Berwick had probably considered the possibility of Sisty getting involved, but even so, he'd accepted the risk and had the Frusevan's youngest daughter approach Alus. Even if everything had not gone exactly according to plan, it had probably fallen within Berwick's expectations.

In Alpha, whenever the ruler and Berwick worked together, they could solve most things. If there was something they couldn't solve, it would be the depression of those involved. This time in particular, only one person mattered—the strongest Magicmaster among all seven nations.

"Alus was really born beneath an unlucky star," said Vizaist.

"Ahem...father?"

"Ah, sorry. That's not for me to say," Vizaist responded to Felinella's soft rebuke by scratching his cheek. "Well, I'm not too worried about that since you said so. Alus is not a child anymore, so I will respect his wishes."

Vizaist seemed to perfectly grasp how Alus felt, although the attitude Alus took with the ruler was devoid of any respect. That's why the Magicmaster had actually had several choices. He could have defected and left Alpha for good or just ignored what was happening.

Those at the absolute top of their field tended to have the freedom to change. But when it came to Alus, the current rank 1, his social and national bonds were intricately intertwined, making it difficult to take the first step towards freedom.

Felinella stared at Vizaist as he spoke, wondering just how deeply he thought about Alus's freedom. Did he refer to freedom from the military or just enough leisurely time for Alus to do what he wanted? No...perhaps he was referring to the outside of this small world.

Felinella was drawn to Alus as a woman, but perhaps her father understood what kind of a person he was better than she did. Unknowingly, she felt somewhat jealous of her father.

Felinella was suddenly shocked. Her father had given her a stern look without realizing it. In an attempt to shake off the uncomfortable atmosphere, Felinella swiftly changed the topic. “By the way, I did imagine you had gone underground for a different matter, but I didn’t think it would be this hard to find your location, father.”

“Yes, I just finished putting the information together. I need to submit a report to Berwick as soon as possible. This is a volatile situation.”

Sensing an unusual atmosphere from his tone, Felinella tensely asked, “...So it was true?”

Vizaist signaled his subordinates, who’d gathered with organized information in hand. Felinella wasn’t an official member of the intelligence department, but she had been assisting her father in his job to an extent that would put a regular soldier to shame, which was why the intelligence department didn’t treat her like an outsider.

“Please have a look at this,” a plain-looking member that would fit in anywhere said seriously. He was dressed in a worn-out work shirt, dirt-stained pants, and old leather boots.

All five of Vizaist’s subordinates had plain-looking clothes, but they were all fine members. Some had wives and children, but for their work they had to abandon their names and use aliases while hiding here and there. Not even Felinella knew their real names.

The man who had spoken looked completely ordinary and would likely be able to blend in anywhere. He used a small stick to point at photos that were seemingly hung up at random on the wall. “First, this is a leaked picture of the target.”

“This image is pretty poor.” The outline of a person was blurry, and Felinella was just barely able to make out their features. Felinella found herself squinting to recognize the details.

“Even this was just barely a safe distance. This woman is not quite cautious as much as she has a very sharp intuition,” another man, who was likely in charge of the photograph, explained to Felinella. “This woman’s name is Mir Ostayka.”

After a lengthy pause the man continued. “She’s an escapee...from a certain place. She has been involved in many murders including the assassinations of VIPs. Someone most likely working for the Fable family approached her and was very likely erased.”

“So the Fable family has been investigating her too?!” asked Felinella.

Vizaist answered Felinella personally. “So it seems. Thanks to their sacrifice we were able to return with this information.”

Their target likely hadn’t expected two people to be observing her.

“Frose is a brilliant instructor, and she is well connected. She must have looked into it after an attacker appeared on their estate,” said Vizaist.

Acting in concert with Vizaist’s words, a subordinate presented a portrait photo. It was of a man with gray hair, printed on old copy paper. “This is Vector. A member of the old Aferka who was eliminated by Selva Greenus at the Fable estate. Like Mir, he escaped from where he was imprisoned.”

Apart from the myriad of documents on Mir and Vector and more, Vizaist was taking a close look at a certain list in his hand. It was a list of prisoners who all met the same specific conditions.

“These are their ‘allies’ that we know about,” explained the subordinate. “All of them are extraordinary magical criminals. And based on the attack on the Fable family and the people assembled with Mir Ostayka, they are all likely hiding within Alpha.”

Vizaist recklessly spread the documents on the table and pressed his temple. Felinella looked over them and asked the question on her mind. “If they’re escapees, where did they escape from? Alpha has a special-class prison? I can’t say I have heard of anything of the sorts.”

“I imagine not. They are people that couldn’t be alive, from a place that doesn’t exist.” Having said that much, the subordinate made eye contact with Vizaist.

Felinella looked at her father as well. Vizaist shrugged and gave a light wave of his hand, granting permission to the subordinate to speak.

“It bears mention that on the record they all resisted arrest, had an accident in custody, or died from disease. With their ostensible existence erased, these criminals were gathered at a certain place...” he explained. As Felinella realized the gravity of the situation, the man continued, “It is a domain under management of Iblis and Clevideet, or in other words the Outer World. More specifically, it’s a secret prison built underground made specifically for serious magical criminals. It is called Trojan Prison. It’s believed that they’ve all escaped from there.”

Felinella said nothing.

“It appears the rumors were true, and it did exist. Secretly rounding up the most incorrigible prisoners, they were given that punishment since the death penalty is banned,” added a fed-up Vizaist. The Trojan Prison...of course Felinella had no knowledge of its existence. There were no examples of large structures in the Outer World, aside from military bases.

As he asked a subordinate for a drink, Vizaist let out a depressed sigh. “It appears that the Trojan Prison was originally conceived as a research facility. I hear it was constructed in the Outer World to conduct research that couldn’t be performed in the Inner World. At some point, it became a receptacle for serious magical criminals,” he recalled with annoyance. “But I digress. At any rate, serious magical criminals are enough of a pain to handle, and there are plenty of humanitarian criticisms of the punishment that squeezes out the last drop of the criminals’ mana. So in the sense of avoiding trouble, it killed two birds with one stone.”

Vizaist was reminded of a special device known as a collar that he had seen in top secret documents. According to the explanation, it was a magical tool used to calm down rampaging criminals, and he knew it was likely used in the secret prison.

“In the Outer World, any escapees would be faced with Fiends. And they wouldn’t be able to reach the human domain in a weakened state. It is truly a logical place for it,” Felinella said as she pondered. It was indeed logical, but if that was the case, how had an escape happened at all?

“Well, I don’t know how much the top brass knows, but I am sure that

Clevideet and Iblis are aware of the situation that's happened near their borders," said Vizaist, aware that it was already too late. He sighed.

At that, a subordinate looked at a paper in hand and said, "The Trojan Prison is divided into five layers, and prisoners are located on them based on how serious their crime was. By the fourth layer, the inmates are magical criminals that are too much for even normal Magicmasters to handle."

"And what about the fifth layer?" asked Felinella.

The man shrugged. "Unfortunately there's not much data, but based on the depth of the underworld, it wouldn't be strange for there to be criminals that even lower Single Digit Magicmasters would struggle to handle."

There had been several magical criminals throughout history who had done heinous things like attempt to overthrow a nation, or even massacres. However, exceptionally few of them had been proper Magicmasters with rankings of their own. After all, the ranking existed in conjunction with fighting against Fiends, and they only reflected the light on the surface.

But the darkness of the world reached unfathomably deep to where no light would reach. For example, the assassination organization Aferka. There was practically nobody from the organization with a high rank among Magicmasters, yet they had at times easily killed powerful Magicmasters.

The light and shadows rarely mixed within the world, and likewise neither did the standards they used to appraise power. When it came to a battle to the death, even taboo or heretical means were used without mercy, making the gap in methods of evaluation even wider.

"Anyways, based on our research, they are all quite the big shots. Some of them with quite a large number of murdered people to their name," said the subordinate.

"Have any one of them been captured?" asked Felinella.

"Unfortunately not. This is just speculation, but unless this is just a group of eccentrics, I believe all prisoners of Trojan Prison have escaped, although I don't know how they would have survived the Outer World without the ability to properly use magic. It would be reasonable to assume that there was someone

helping them out from the inside. But it wouldn't exactly be surprising if someone from the underworld infiltrated the secret prison and influenced the events from within."

Hearing that, Vizaist bitterly spoke up. "Speaking of, I recall Godma Barhong being murdered by someone in the same way. The culprit leisurely walked right into the military headquarters and is still unknown to this day. Of course, the possibility of an insider was thoroughly investigated, but all suspects were cleared. As a result, it was concluded that it had been an outside party, not that there could be many capable of that. Either some large organization like Kurama must have helped, or perhaps the very same person is behind this as that. The investigation into this should hopefully turn up some leads."

As Vizaist growled, another subordinate with a light build peeled off a large sheet of paper and laid it out on the table next to the list of criminals. "We are currently aware of fifteen escapees. Among them, these are the ones to look out for. There is the previously mentioned Mir Ostayka. And this man...known as Dante. But regardless of our investigations, his real name is unknown."

Vizaist frowned. "You can't find anything on him?"

"Whether he's an orphan, an abandoned child, or someone erased from the family register, we just don't know. He could even have lost his memories, be a hidden child of some ruler, or so on... No matter how harshly he was interrogated, he remained silent about the most important matters. He is unusually robust, both mentally and physically, so not even psychological coaxing or a truth serum worked. Perhaps he is instead a messenger of God or the devil. Or maybe even an artificial human?" The subordinate jokingly shrugged, but Vizaist wasn't laughing.

"That's enough joking around. Continue," he said.

"Excuse me. Of the ones hiding within Alpha, the only one we have been able to confirm the identity of is Mir. There are still many mysteries around Dante. Even the circumstances of his capture are strange. After instigating a massacre of soldiers in Iblis he willingly surrendered."

"Surrendered...?! A serious magical criminal like him?" Felinella unconsciously raised her voice but soon collected herself. She blushed and apologized before

urging the man to continue.

“Your surprise is understandable,” he said. “After all, the motives for his crimes or surrender are unknown, and it is a fact that many of Iblis’s finest Magicmasters lost their lives shortly before his capture. But even this information is at the level of a state secret, so this is as far as we can investigate. Incidentally, Dante was held on the fifth layer and it is entirely possible that he led the breakout.”

After that, Felinella dedicated herself to burning the information on the table into her memory. Aside from the bare minimum, these documents would all eventually be destroyed. But Felinella had never even heard of the Trojan Prison, and frankly, she had no idea how the intelligence department members had gathered this much information. Her father was close to Berwick, and he might be allowed access to top secret information, but...

She might have been thoughtful and intelligent, but she was still a young girl and there was lots of the world she didn’t know, and now even she was starting to feel like the conspiracy theories people spoke of in the streets weren’t entirely off the mark.

For example, she wondered just how much about the cataclysm half a century ago had been caused by Cronus’s attack, and whether the number of casualties caused by it was true. But considering the number of deaths and the collapse of order, she knew it would only be for the better if it was all false. And right now, memorizing the list of prisoners came first.

While she was using the fullest of her brilliant brain, her expression suddenly froze and she doubted her ears at her father’s words. “First Alus needs to be told. Can I leave that to you, Feli?”

After a pause, Felinella turned to father and asked in a strangely stiff and polite way, “Father, are you perhaps trying to destroy your daughter’s love?”

There was no doubt that Alus was keeping military affairs at an arm’s distance.

Vizaist’s expression stiffened, and he tried to make excuses. “No, uhm, duties and private lives are meant to be separate,” he said, trying to give an evasive answer.

Felinella stifled her father's incoherent attitude with just a stare. "I understand," she very briefly replied.

Letting out a heavy sigh to calm down, she realized that, logically, it was the best method. If anything, she was secretly happy to have an excuse to meet Alus. Besides, Vizaist's intelligence department didn't just gather information; they also passed it along to the right people at the right time. Information was only meaningful when it was used well and only valuable when it led to action.

And in Alpha, nobody had a higher ability to take action and get things done than Alus. So while it was necessary to seek Berwick's judgment as the final decision-maker on the military side, delivering information to Alus—the strongest force in the nation—didn't go against the original purpose of the intelligence department. If anything, they existed to deliver information to him.

In other words, Felinella's instructions could be interpreted as informing Alus in advance of the next move Berwick would make. She noticed that Vizaist's attention had suddenly shifted to the front door.

"They're finally here," said Vizaist, and Felinella sensed someone standing outside.

A large man in a jumpsuit knelt, breathing heavily, his face dripping sweat. His jumpsuit was damp with sweat, some dark spots forming here and there. He struggled to breathe and just barely formed words.

"Captain Vizaist..." he panted, "C-Clevideet's Single, Fanon Trooper just...! Sh-She has just left her nation and is headed for Alpha!"

"Calm down and get to the point. Why is another nation's Single headed for Alpha?" Vizaist asked the man.

Single Digit Magicmasters were a nation's most valuable assets; each and every one of them was the equivalent of an army. For one of them to set foot in another nation without permission was almost the equivalent of an invading army and could be a serious political issue.

Felinella filled up a nearby cup with water and handed it to the chubby man. The man gulped it all down as quickly as he could, then responded rapidly and impatiently. "It's solid information from our informant in Clevideet. There are

clear indications of the border being breached. It's not just Fanon Trooper but her squad as well!"

"Tsk!" Vizaist clicked his tongue. He slammed down and spread out a map of Alpha on the desk. Now they had escaped convicts and a rampant Single on their hands.

"Did the Clevideet government not say anything beforehand?!" Vizaist loudly asked, clearly frustrated. Of course, nobody present could answer. His face twisted bitterly, and he only uttered a brief sentence as he busily marked the map with a pen. "Get moving!"

The other members sensed his meaning and hurriedly threw the documents about the escaped prisoners and other miscellaneous information into the fireplace. Once the destruction was complete, they all stood ready for their next orders with resolve on their faces. Felinella, who only helped with her father occasionally, realized she wouldn't have been able to read his objective as well as they had.

"It's clearly an abnormal situation, but there's nothing on the emergency communications channel. I doubt anyone within the nation has sensed the situation yet. Fortunately, we're near the border," said Vizaist.

The sweaty, chubby man moved to stand next to Vizaist, who was staring down the map. Soon the others joined in and busily exchanged information. Using the man's report and the intel from their informant in Clevideet, they calculated where Fanon and her squad should be at that moment.

Felinella timidly asked a pertinent question, "By the way, do you know anything about what Fanon Trooper's squad is after?"

"Y-Yes...I have heard that there was a terrorist attack within Clevideet, but I lost contact in the middle of the attack, so I don't know if that is true or not."

"Then I doubt they will follow any formal procedures before they enter the nation..." Vizaist concluded with a bitter expression. After all, a Single Digit Magicmaster's squad was moving without any official notification. If she was anything like their own nation's rank 1 problem child, it was highly unlikely that Fanon would follow proper procedures. "Escapees and terrorism, is it? So I doubt that the movements of Clevideet's Single are completely unrelated.

Anyways, we don't have enough information as is."

Considering the grave matters at hand, the incidents were almost definitely related; however, Fanon Trooper's rampage might stir up further problems. A whole lot of extra work had just fallen into their laps.

Damn you, doing as you please! My only option is to go out there myself, Vizaist thought. As he ordered his subordinates and gathered more information, Vizaist desperately racked his brain.

Even if they ignored the border checkpoints, there was the magical net set up by watchtowers along the border, each with guards assigned to them. But since it concerned another nation's Single, the situation easily exceeded their authority. Because of the political nuances behind it, they would struggle to decide whether to push or pull.

Despite his rugged appearance, Vizaist was also politically adept and could easily understand the situation. While he pondered, one of his subordinates handed him a memo with new information. He snatched it and let out a small groan. "Ugh, they're moving very fast. At this rate we might lose them. Not good. If they cross the border at this rate, it could turn into a major political issue!"

If things became even more problematic, it wouldn't just be a matter of pursuing escaped prisoners. It could even develop into a problem that shook Cicelnia's current government. And Vizaist and his subordinates were the only ones who could really make a move. It was fortunate they were in such a remote region. Once they had a good idea of Fanon's route, they could take the shortest distance possible to get to the heart of the matter.

"Gather everyone that's out! And send them the coordinates!" commanded Vizaist.

At their captain's orders, the subordinates, all wearing different clothing, replied in unison. "Understood!"

Eightieth Chapter

Cold War Negotiations

Near the borders of Alpha and Clevideet a group sprinted towards Alpha in the darkness, their bodies covered in cloaks that made them look suspicious. This was the group Vizaist feared—a squad led by the world’s Hardest Magicmaster, Fanon Trooper. With her were two male Magicmasters, one female Magicmaster, one female healing Magicmaster, and the rank 1 Spotter, Exceles Lilyusem.

Fanon’s hood fluttered as she looked into the direction they were headed. Her forehead was covered in blood-soaked gauze, a remnant of her previous battle. It looked like it hurt, and it made the other five, including Exceles, question how reliable she was right now.

In order to keep from needlessly provoking Alpha, they’d kept the elite squad small. Of course, Fanon had no objections. She was going to kill the two heinous thugs that had so brazenly indiscriminately attacked the citizens of her nation even if she had to do so alone.

They had given her a hard time on their last encounter, but it would be different this time. Now she was equipped well and ready for her revenge match. Fanon moved at high speed. She wore an eerie smile as she spoke, “Exceles, you better be keeping a track of that blockhead and gun user.”

“Of course. There is nothing to worry about,” the world’s top Spotter coolly replied to Fanon as she ran, carrying two large cylinders.

Of course, even though this was military duty, Fanon was wearing fashionable casual clothes. Her love for all things cute shone through even as she burned for revenge. Here at the border zone, her goth loli appearance stood out whether she liked it or not. The only thing that stood for something other than looking fancy were large cylinders containing the Three Precept Contradiction, which were attached to Exceles by a special belt.

They were Fanon's exclusive AWRs, and taking them out required permission from the top of the military or Clevideet's ruler. That decision was made in consideration of Fanon's personality—as she tended to get emotional and overdo it in the heat of battle—because the AWRs' powers could be frightening if she got worked up and lost her ability to restrain herself.

At present, the second-in-command, Exceles, had the authority to permit her to bring out two of the three, as each of the Three Precepts was considered its own AWR. Each was formidable in its own right, but when equipped with all three, Fanon had her trump card. Their use was really only permitted in the Outer World and required Exceles's okay, as well as the ruler's and Governor-General's approval.

Although I'm sure only one would be enough, Exceles thought as she glanced back at one of the cylinders and stroked it.

The sudden battle from before had been unexpected, but fortunately, the damage hadn't been too enormous, and they had gotten to see their opponent's powers firsthand.

There won't be a repeat of last time, when Lady Fanon was equipped with this AWR. With this thought, Exceles suddenly realized that she had lost some of her cool. She was unexpectedly moved.

At any rate, it was clear that Fanon was enraged, and this was Exceles's first time seeing her blow her top so badly. But she could tell by their deliberately small formation that some thought had still been put into an excuse for violating Alpha's borders. Even so, she felt somewhat uneasy.

Not only do we need to deal with those attackers, we also need to retrieve that without Alpha noticing, she thought. It had been a message Exceles had received from a subordinate. In exchange for the higher-ups of Clevideet unexpectedly ratifying Fanon's actions, they had added a condition—a mission to recover the AWR stolen from Area 90.

She had technically told Fanon about it, but she was concerned the Hardest Magicmaster wouldn't bother to pay any attention to it. And if things broke down into a serious political issue, it wouldn't be Fanon who would shoulder the blame. The higher-ups, knowing her selfishness, had more or less given her

free reign. Exceles, who was not just Fanon's second-in-command but also her chaperone, would be held accountable.

While depressing, Exceles understood that the higher-ups couldn't allow their brand-new, top secret AWRs to remain in the hands of thieves. *But how could they let them be stolen so easily in the first place and then demand us to retrieve them without Alpha noticing*, she thought. *The higher-ups really are shameless. Perhaps they are even willing to upset Lady Fanon for it.*

This information had been conveyed to Fanon and the rest of her squad. In fact, technically their primary objective was to retrieve the AWRs, but considering how angry Fanon was, even if they tried to accomplish their mission in secret, it could lead to destruction of property or casualties within Alpha.

After all, the AWR thieves had no problem starting a fight in the middle of a city and dragging civilians into it.

Therefore, their mission was very challenging politically. It would be less nerve-racking to fight a horde of Fiends in the Outer World.

Just as Exceles sighed, her sharp senses picked up a strange wave of mana, and she saw the sky in the direction they were traveling burn red. Considering how rough the wave of mana was, she had no doubt it was the two they were pursuing, Gordon and Suzar, invoking some kind of power.

"Hmph. Are they trying to start something? We're almost to Alpha's border," Fanon said fearlessly. Meanwhile Exceles looked appalled, her face turning pale.

"What is it?" asked Fanon.

"I am sorry, Lady Fanon. My tracking has come off...! I lost the target!" exclaimed Exceles.

"Huh?! What are you talking about?!" Fanon shouted in astonishment.

However, Exceles was just as astonished. As the rank 1 Spotter, she was very confident in her own abilities. Exceles detected the mana information body, which was unique for every Magicmaster. More specifically, she located her opponent by sensing the waves of mana they emitted, a method that was practically undetectable to opponents unlike blasting waves like mana sonars.

On top of that, she could accurately detect all mana within her range, down to the minutest detail. This meant she could sense Magicmasters' mana waves with ease. When she was scanning mana, she saw a completely different world, and as long as she'd seen someone's mana information once, she could consciously visualize their position on a map in her head as if she'd planted a beacon on them. But something was wrong.

The bruise at her neck wriggled, and her left cheek took on an eerie black color. "It's no good," she said. "The beacon has come off. But how?"

Exceles was absorbed in thought, but Fanon didn't demand an explanation from her as mana swelled up from within. "That's okay, it doesn't matter anymore. We know that they're up ahead!"

The squad nodded at Fanon's words and picked up speed, ready for a fight. However, when they arrived where the wave of mana had come from, they saw a bizarre devastation.

The top of an Alpha watchtower had been blown away, and fires burned all over. Complex magical equipment had melted away, and electricity sparked from broken equipment. Near the collapsing watchtower lay around ten dead watchmen. Based on their appearance, they had been killed without putting up much resistance, and inside were even more, some non-Magicmasters among them, engineers by the look of it.

Ugh...! thought Fanon, sharing a bitter look with Exceles as they realized they were too late.

Suddenly, one of the squad members shouted, "One of them is still alive!"

A few minutes later, Fanon ground her teeth as she saw the blood drain from the unconscious man's face. His scorched border patrol uniform was stained with blood. He had taken a gunshot to the torso, and immediately afterwards, he'd taken cover under his desk and just barely stayed alive.

"We don't have that much medicine, do we? Then we'll just have to hurry and take them down before they can harm anyone else! Let's go, Exceles!" Fanon said in a stiff tone, and Exceles nodded once in response, putting her hand on Fanon's delicate shoulder.

“No, he can still be saved. Even though it may have been a one-sided attack by the thieves, abandoning the wounded would harm Alpha’s impression of us. So please hold off on pursuing them for a little longer.”

“They killed innocent civilians in Clevideet! I am the world’s hardest Magicmaster, and I couldn’t protect them! So I have to make them pay!”

“I understand your anger, but please calm yourself. I swear that I will locate them again.” Exceles embraced Fanon from behind, gently wrapping her arms around the girl’s shoulders, which trembled with anger. Fanon gritted her teeth once more, before strength left her body.

“You’re right. All right, check to see if there are any other survivors. Leave any injured to the healing Magicmaster! After that, give them some first aid!” she said.

Fanon still had complex feelings on the matter, but she changed gears and gave swift orders, much to the relief of the other squad members. In the end, they found and saved three survivors and took some time to put out the fires.

Once that was over, Fanon looked at Exceles with a frown. “Exceles, isn’t this the first time that you’ve lost someone?”

“That’s not true,” she answered, “but it seems like our targets didn’t intentionally do so. It must have been something the gun user did. A strange magical field has been formed in a thirty meter radius around the watchtower. It appears that the force field created an artificial beacon by chance.” It was likely created by the gun-type AWR Caligula that Suzar had stolen. “It feels like he shot up an explosive bullet that spread a jamming effect.”

Exceles and the others had no way to know it, but this effect was similar to the mana inhibiting snow that had caused so much trouble for Alus and the others in Vanalis. The force field prevented mana from bonding within its range and emitted randomly constructed mana waves at a regular interval and, at times, bursts of mana light.

“Yes. But that said, this ability to fire all kinds of magic bullets must have been based on my Three Precept Contradiction,” said Fanon.

It was hard to imagine that the Aegis had been used as a reference for the

gun-type AWR, so it was likely one of the other two.

“This sucks... They barely let me use it at all!” Fanon bitterly said, biting her nails.

“It’s not just the watchtower; the mana cables for communications have all been cut off too. All of the communication systems in the area are down because of this strange force field. Perhaps that was the point of the attack,” said Exceles. But it seemed like the fact that it had even torn off Exceles’s own tracking had been unintended.

“Maybe they’re trying to buy time, or perhaps they didn’t want to be pursued over the border,” said Fanon.

Exceles nodded at Fanon’s words just as the healing Magicmaster whispered into her ear. “I just tried to send an anonymous report to Alpha’s security forces, but I can’t reach them. The communications system’s completely down.”

Exceles furrowed her brow at the confused squad member. The force field wasn’t just interfering with her sensing, it seemed to have been put in place to shut down the communications network. She glanced over at the wounded and started to rub her temples. “This is a problem, Lady Fanon. We can’t leave them like this.”

“Can’t you do something about it?!” Fanon asked, blatant irritation on her face.

Regardless of her frustration, they couldn’t abandon their policy of prioritizing human lives now. After moving all of the survivors into the shade of a tree, Exceles had a squad member prepare an emergency flare. She hadn’t wanted to use it if she could avoid it, since by analyzing the flare, Alpha would find out from where they were, but it was too late to turn back. However, just as the squad member was about to fire the flare, Fanon stopped them. “Exceles, it seems that won’t be necessary.”

Exceles didn’t overlook the slight tension in Fanon’s voice, and she stiffened as well. She hadn’t let her guard down, but she had been influenced by the mana field. And before she knew it, figures had appeared from the shadows of the trees.

It was a group of men. They were dressed plainly and all wore friendly expressions. One by one, they appeared...looking like villagers from a nearby village.

“Lady Fanon!” Exceles moved up to Fanon and sent her a signal with her eyes.

Sensing her intentions, Fanon sent a sharp glance towards the men. She had picked up that they were no ordinary villagers. They had an air of mystery around them. The moment Fanon put up her guard, a man with a bent back at the front of the group suddenly straightened it up, so straight, it was like he had a board on his back.

The other men followed his lead and straightened their backs; even the way they walked changed visibly. They behaved like trained soldiers who gave no openings.

Just as Fanon and her squad readied themselves, a voice rang out as a final figure appeared from the trees. He was a big and burly man with a deep voice. “To think we’d be seen through so easily. It seems my subordinates still need more work. That said, there is much I need to hear from you. Oh esteemed guests from Clevideet.”

Unspoken in the words was an intimidating implication that they were prepared to fight depending on the answer. Fanon knew her plan to act in secrecy had already fallen apart. Exceles couldn’t help but feel that they’d run out of luck to come across this man so quickly after crossing the border.

“It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lord Socalent,” Exceles began with a sociable smile and greeting. As she observed the other party, her fake smile turned darker. “It seems you already know of our affiliation. As you are no doubt aware, I am a spotter from Clevideet. My name is Exceles Lilyusem. The others with me are all my companions.”

As the second-in-command, Exceles was in charge of paperwork and information gathering, and due to her specialization, she had a decent amount of knowledge about other nations. Considering the man’s appearance and the air of experience he exuded, she knew he was almost certainly Vizaist Socalent, said to lead Alpha’s highly skilled intelligence department. Since it would be simple for him to discern between truths and falsehoods, Exceles quickly

abandoned the pretense for their covert operation, knowing that lying would be pointless.

By being frank, she shifted to probing the other party. It was a bold, flexible move by someone who could see the full picture. However, Vizaist showed no change in expression as he answered. “I thank you very much for your kind greetings. I see, indeed, that beauty is no doubt belonging to the rank 1 Spotter, Exceles. Like you, I have some knowledge of Clevideet. However...” an unmistakable sarcasm and irritation entered Vizaist’s voice. “You trample on our territory with military boots and ask for smiles and handshakes...? It seems the Clevideet style of greeting is severely lacking in refinement.”

Exceles drew back at his piercing glance. The name of Vizaist Socalent, a bold and attentive head of a noble family, had reached even the neighboring country of Clevideet. After all, he had always supported the major nation as the head of one of its three great noble families.

The depth and breadth of his information network was unthinkable. If one wanted to protect information from him, they would need to suspect even a friend of decades old. As Exceles looked at his subordinates’ clever disguises, she became convinced that they were also too skilled for Magicmaster to be their side job. She knew she couldn’t let her guard down around them for a moment.

However, only Exceles could read that much into it that quickly, and the others were only just recalling that Socalent was one of the great nobles of Alpha. So she decided to step in front of Fanon. She wanted to stop any outbursts, seeing that Vizaist’s sarcasm had already upset Clevideet’s top Magicmaster.

First she wanted to look into their priority. Were they here to peacefully settle things, or were they willing to resort to military conflict if necessary? Based on their conversation so far, it seemed to be the latter, but Exceles at least wanted to try her hand at negotiation.

“Pardon me, Lord Socalent. Of course, we are not behind this cruel attack. We have also finished applying first aid to the injured. However, some require immediate aid, and I believe it would be best to get a doctor as soon as

possible.”

Exceles said “we” twice to emphasize that they were not the guilty party, trying to earn favor with Alpha by mentioning their treatment of the injured. And she continued to further press the point. “Of course, we have no intention of antagonizing you. If anything we are glad to see Lord Socalent of the intelligence department, one of the three great noble families of Alpha, come here.”

Exceles said this in a manner to convey his status and details to Fanon and the others and discourage them from making any rash moves, as much as to try to win Vizaist over for the sake of a compromise.

Exceles was hastily trying to bring things into a discussion.

Yet despite her efforts...

“This old man’s annoying. Stop moping around and go help your soldiers. Even if they are from a different nation, seeing people we’ve treated dying before our eyes is nothing but a nuisance,” exclaimed Fanon.



Fanon's whine was starting to give Exceles a headache. If she weren't so calm and collected, she would have made a fierce retort or two.

Vizaist's temples twitched at Fanon's inability to read the room. "I take it you are Clevideet's Single, Fanon Trooper. But does your nation's Single even know how to speak like an adult? Being too simple-minded can ruin you."

"That's a pretty good joke for an old man. But it's out of style," responded Fanon.

"What?! Lady Fanon, wait!" Exceles stepped between the two to defuse the explosive situation.

If Fanon were to become enraged and this Alpha VIP were to be hurt, it would cause serious diplomatic problems. Depending on how Alpha responded, it could even lead to war. Clevideet's Single being involved was bad enough, but if things escalated, they would also let Gordon and Suzar escape. Then if they were to massacre people in Alpha, there would be a higher risk of war between the nations. After all, they were using AWRs created by Clevideet.

Ahh, this is the worst possible situation. Typically we'd want to break through by force if necessary and get those AWRs back, thought Exceles. She wanted to whine because it seemed even Exceles's restraint wasn't enough to suppress Fanon's fury.

But the loli goth girl did have a point. Her squad had been the ones who had treated the injured, and if they had abandoned them, it was clear the scales would tip against them. Seeing Fanon raise her umbrella AWR's tip—what amounted to the spearhead on a spear—Exceles's shoulders slumped as if it was all over.

That was when a refreshing woman's voice rang out. "Commander..."

Exceles gazed at the beautiful young woman who had appeared next to Vizaist and spoken in an admonishing tone. Suddenly Vizaist's threatening demeanor disappeared like it had never been there in the first place.

"Mmm..."

Sensing that Vizaist's anger had been extinguished, relief came over Exceles.

At the very least, they'd avoided the worst outcome. Looking at the woman again, Exceles realized she was pretty young. In spite of her ample breasts and bewitching atmosphere, she looked young enough to be called a girl.

Fanon's youthfulness came from her childlike face, but this woman's came from how glossy her skin was. The woman smiled and bowed before speaking.

"I apologize for my father. I fear we can't give you a warm welcome, but we can at least hear what you have to say. That way I am sure we can reach some kind of compromise."

"Hey. Feli! Ugh." Vizaist wanted to object to Felinella's proposal for discussion, but a swift elbow left him reeling in agony.

She just said her father? Then this is...

"His daughter?" Exceles accidentally blurted out, before hurriedly closing her mouth. But no matter who it was, she had given them a helping hand. Regardless of her age, Exceles looked at her with respect due to her aid.

"Lady Fanon, in Alpha we are just Magicmasters from a neighboring nation. And it's only natural that its people would be suspicious of our movements. So why don't we explain ourselves and ask for their accommodation," said Exceles.

Fanon's squad were at the border, and while they could claim that they technically hadn't crossed it, they had unquestionably threatened Alpha with military might. Based on Vizaist's attitude, her team had already crossed a line and they had few options available.

"Yes, yes, as long as there's someone reasonable to talk to," Fanon replied sarcastically, but Exceles had another thought in mind.

She thought back to Vizaist's anger and stubbornness... Perhaps that had been a bluff to throw them off and put them in an inferior position of invaders. But even if that was the case, he was quite gutsy to try such tactics against Fanon when she was so easily prone to outbursts.

Thinking about it, they hadn't actually spent that much time treating the wounded, yet Vizaist had arrived so quickly. Considering his outstanding information-gathering ability, he probably already had some degree of information on them. In that case, she wondered how much he knew. Did he

know about the stolen AWRs, the terror attack in Clevideet? About the identities of the attackers? And what about the reason Fanon and her squad had come?

Their battle for the initiative had begun from the moment he appeared from the trees.

Phew, if he knew everything...there wouldn't be many cards we could play, thought Exceles, completely honestly.

Her opponent had a vast hand of cards, while her own squad only had a few they could play in return.

Not to mention that one of those cards, the stolen AWRs and their mission to retrieve them, was a self-destructive joker.

This is just a hunch, but I don't think he knows about this joker. In which case, we'll need to keep it concealed. While Exceles thought to herself, reinforcements from Alpha finally arrived. They carried away the injured and prepared to transport them into the nation. Surprisingly, they weren't soldiers. While some were healing Magicmasters, the group basically consisted of military medics and nurses.

Vizaist glanced at them and spoke up in his usual deep voice. "It seems things have calmed down here as well. Now that the rear guard is here, let's get on with it."

Exceles nodded, and she and Fanon, who had calmed down, followed behind Vizaist. On the way, Exceles worriedly looked over at Fanon. Even as second-in-command, she didn't have any experience in political negotiations in such a dire situation, and she could only hope that Fanon's unruly side wouldn't burst out in a critical moment.

"Did you notice, Exceles?" Fanon spoke in a hushed tone, as if sensing Exceles's somber silence. "Don't you think they showed up too fast?"

Exceles responded with a stiff expression. "Yes, they certainly were fast. But..." Fanon had noticed the biggest concern. Healing Magicmasters were a precious resource, and this response had been uncannily fast and perfect, making it suspicious. "Soldiers? I think they're the other side's subordinates, but

I can't tell."

"If they're acting, they are very skilled. If I use detection, I should be able to tell..." said Fanon.

It was impossible to tell them apart from non-Magicmasters. The mana leaking from them seemed entirely natural and they were not built for fighting. So while they seemed to be soldiers, there was no way to know for sure. It was a first for Fanon.

She sighed in resignation. Normally, her unyielding spirit and self-centeredness took center stage, but Fanon did possess the intellect and intuition to climb up to the rank of Single. Right now, those talents were rearing their heads, and she responded with unusual calm.

"I suppose there are shrewd people in every nation. If they'd simply attacked us with force we could crush them without hesitation, but by attacking our weak point with bargaining there's not much we can do... That old man, Vizaist Socalent, was it? While they were elusively bargaining, those reinforcements arrived not just to take care of the injured, but to keep us in check, right? I bet their own Singles are giving them a handful, so they have experience in dealing with them. Pretty similar to our ruler."

"Ah! So it would seem," Exceles said, having only just noticed.

Vizaist had called the new arrivals the rear guard, but that typically referred to a military unit. Medics and nurses weren't usually considered combatants. So these were probably soldiers, but they were skilled enough at blending in to make Fanon's group question their status.

If they were non-Magicmasters, they had a different type of military strength to act as a deterrent to Fanon. In a sense, they were hostages and a wall to keep Fanon from running wild, because overwhelming mana or not, the rank of Single was built into the social system. Having built their reputation through their rank, their social status and pride as Magicmasters forbade them from using any flashy spells that would get noncombatants caught up in them.

So in a case like this, a number of powerless ordinary people trumped a mighty army. Even if there was a ninety percent chance they were soldiers, once the possibility of them being non-Magicmasters appeared, it was difficult

to get it out of their mind. Harming a non-Magicmaster was the greatest taboo for Magicmasters, and even more so for a Single. Magicmasters existed for the sake of non-Magicmasters, and abandoning that basic principle was essentially social suicide.

Fanon had come here, burning with rage and injured on her forehead, to hunt down the criminals who killed her nation's citizens. Could she possibly drag another nation's people into a fight herself? Vizaist had anticipated as much. Normally, Fanon acted irrationally and without hesitation, but that wasn't an option unless something major happened in this situation.

"From another nation or not, it'd be a nuisance if the people we treated were to die before our eyes," she said, and Vizaist had seen through her proud persona to one of the core reasons why, no matter how irrational or self-indulgent she could be, her squad never left her.

I suppose that means he has a high opinion of Lady Fanon, to use such a bold and drastic measure. But, well, I suppose it is an effective blow, Exceles sensed, glancing at Fanon's profile.

Exceles couldn't remember when she last saw Fanon sigh every so often and sulk with such a resigned expression. For better or worse, Fanon's temperament was clear to anyone around her. Her own transparent nature made it especially difficult for her to bargain with those who were difficult to read. Exceles decided to think of the development as an unexpected stroke of luck.

After that, Fanon and the others were led to a house so old it left them stunned. It was the hideout that Vizaist and his subordinates had been using. The interior was a little too cramped to fit everyone; even using the rustic kitchen didn't give them enough space, and several subordinates for both groups were left standing.

Still, one could not help but feel that leading a Single, those often considered the most important people in matters of diplomacy, to a place like this was way out of the norm.

"Now then, may we hear the reason you decided to sneak into our nation?" Vizaist sarcastically asked as he dragged over a chair and sat down.

“More importantly, what are you thinking, bringing me to such a filthy place? Frankly, I can’t believe the nerve!” Fanon was a bit of a clean freak, and she pinched her nose at the smell of stale air in the room as she questioned the other side’s sanity.

Exceles almost broke into a cold sweat, but she resigned herself to leave it all up to Fanon, who was currently controlling herself. In Clevideet, she often made absurd demands of the ruler and Governor-General and got her way, so this was not unusual. Even if she was a little bit too aggressive, Fanon Trooper was intelligent and not bad at negotiating.

“Hmm, how impolite of us.” Vizaist looked a little daunted, but he wasn’t particularly intimidated and stared back at Fanon. “However we are very busy ourselves, and I feel it would be best if we say what needs to be said before you return to where you came from.”

“Like I said, it’s not that simple! Jeez, fine, but this will get a little complicated,” Fanon said and crossed her legs.

Vizaist’s expression changed. He grinned and rubbed his chin. “Is that so...then let us hear it.”

After that Exceles explained a portion of the tragedy that had taken place in Clevideet in Fanon’s stead. Vizaist seemed to already have a vague understanding of it, but it was unlikely that he had known the details. She realized this was one of the cards that they could play.

“And so we came to Alpha in pursuit of those fleeing attackers,” Exceles said, playing the card at Fanon’s request. But as Vizaist was a shrewd veteran, she had a feeling that the odds were against them. “As such, we would like to request your aid to apprehend, or deal with these criminals in the interest of your nation’s security.”

“Hmph, you were planning on sneaking in if you could, weren’t you?” one of Vizaist’s subordinates pointed out.

“Well...yes, even if we are a squad led by Clevideet’s Single, we know that we don’t have the authority to pursue criminals into a different nation, but we have our honor to consider. Clevideet citizens were slaughtered. We can’t allow another nation to deal with men who have committed such horrors. They must

be captured and brought back to our nation and face their crimes,” Exceles appealed in a strong tone.

That said, she did feel some unease inside. After all, the honor she spoke of referred more to Fanon’s own than the military from Clevideet.

Fanon seemed to be satisfied with Exceles’s argument, but every so often she touched the bandage covering the injury on her forehead that she got from Gordon. After hearing what Exceles had to say, Vizaist fell silent for a moment.

Eventually, he calmly spoke up again with a softer attitude. “And, what are their names?”

“I couldn’t tell you that. We have an obligation to keep military secrets,” Exceles replied, saying that the information wouldn’t come for free. She proceeded carefully while vigilantly observing the other side. Playing their cards whenever the opponent asked for it was no way to negotiate.

Vizaist, meanwhile, took everything into consideration and pondered his next course of action. He wanted to extract at least some information out of them. “I understand your circumstances, but they are your own. Besides, what is with those dangerous looking things? They could certainly be seen as a means of military invasion.” Vizaist motioned at the large cylinders that Fanon’s squad had brought with them.

Exceles maintained a calm smile to hide the critical hit she had taken. “They are the bare minimum preparations to capture the criminals. They are most certainly not weapons for an invasion.”

“Suspicious. That equipment...it appears to me to be some sort of AWR. I’ll have you know that I’m not just some old informer, but a Magicmaster as well.”

The pressure coming from Vizaist suddenly increased. At that point, Exceles resolved herself to get past Vizaist’s discerning eye, even if it meant strained lies.

“No, in this state they are just parts...” she said.

That was when Felinella spoke in a calming tone to dispel the tension. “It seems you are at a standstill.”

She walked in carrying a tray with tea for everyone. As the daughter of a noble family, Felinella was not just familiar with traditional tea etiquette, but also well versed in cross-cultural hospitality. But the place being the place, there was a limit. There was nothing to snack on with the tea, and the utensils were old-fashioned and darkened. Still, the aroma of the tea helped alleviate the mood.

She added some more words to displace the tense atmosphere. “Father, I can understand why you must be stern for the sake of your duties, but Lady Fanon and her party are a Single Digit Magicmaster squad representing Clevideet. Since you have gone through the trouble of coming all this way to see them, why not report this to the Governor-General...or even the ruler and request their full hospitality,” Felinella said with a bright smile.

Seeing the discretion in her eyes, Vizaist’s eyebrows rose a little, and he let out a sigh of resignation. “Hmm...I see. Perhaps that would be for the better.”

“Ah, that’s...” Exceles blurted out, but the moment Vizaist nodded at Felinella’s suggestion, Clevideet’s squad had already seized the initiative.

Their mission to secure the stolen AWRs had to be done in secret. And while Exceles had decided to reveal part of their mission to Vizaist, she wanted to get through this situation without playing all of her hand so they could get back to carrying out their mission in secret.

But receiving a grand welcome was a completely different story. Attention would gather on their every motion, making it impossible to act covertly. Any responsibilities for trespassing would start to blur, but it would also keep them from achieving their objective.

Felinella’s proposal was an ingenious one. Unperturbed by Exceles’s internal conflict, Vizaist continued.

“Yes, this old shack is certainly no place to receive a Single and her party. Very well, it might have been a rather rough visit, but if they are going through the proper procedures to visit Alpha, we need to show proper manners.”

Exceles bit the inside of her lip. As expected, the other party was too good for them to get by using clever tricks.

Then, Felinella spoke up again. “By the way, how is the tea? Lady Fanon, Lady Exceles? I would also like to apologize for our impoliteness, Lady Fanon. This is my first time meeting another nation’s Single Digit Magicmaster, and I am aware that greeting you with my paltry tea is a failure in etiquette...”

It was a splendid conversational technique, closing in on the other party without potential offense. Her voice was clear as a bell, and she wore a bashful smile. Felinella acted like the perfect refined lady, and it softened the hard-to-please Fanon’s heart. If it had been a brusque man’s insolent question, Fanon might have thrown away the cup and shot out of her seat.

“Well, it’s not bad. I was just getting tired of this long talk. You’re Felinella, right?” Fanon asked with an innocent expression, and Felinella replied with a smile—“Yes.”

Nevertheless, comparing them by height and maturity, it was hard to tell who was older.

“You said something interesting before. Another nation’s Single...normally there are few chances to meet even your own nation’s Single. Are you perhaps in an important position despite your young age?”

The question was too pointed to think of as innocent curiosity, but Felinella’s expression remained unchanged as she answered. “Yes, I am quite close to Alpha’s rank 1, Sir Alus Reigin. He is my junior in the Institute.”

Vizaist let out a cough to warn her not to leak information without reason, but Felinella had other thoughts on the matter and held her smile. She may have looked somewhat proud and happy, but...she struggled to remain calm.

“I-Institute? A Single? Ah, I believe I heard something like that in the previous rulers conference.” Fanon had seen Alus once in the previous rulers conference. She had gotten a glimpse of his ability when he restrained Halcapdia’s giant of a Single, Galgnis.

At Fanon’s unrest, it was clear the initiative had completely shifted to Alpha, perhaps just as Felinella planned. Taken aback, Fanon’s mouth opened, but her surprise wasn’t related to Alus.

“That aside...you are a student? Really?” Fanon’s wide-open eyes looked over

Felinella. She had thin and supple legs and gracefully slender hips visible even through her clothes, and most of all, her abundant bust gave off an overwhelming female presence.

“Yes, I am in my second year in the Second Magical Institute,” Felinella replied cheerfully.

“S-Second year? S-So you really are a student...hmmm...” Fanon instinctively gulped down her tea, her hands trembling as she put down her teacup.

Exceles was also surprised and asked Felinella a question. “Excuse me, but are you part of the military’s intelligence department while you are still a student?”

“Not at all. I am only helping a little.”

It wasn’t uncommon for noble children to take on some military duties, but it was Felinella’s masterful demeanor that was frightening. She not only assisted that Vizaist but even took the lead at times. And based on how his subordinates treated Felinella, it certainly didn’t seem like she was just a helping student. Rather than just being used to missions, it appeared that she was fully blending in.

Exceles simply replied with a deadpan “I see,” but on the inside she was astonished. She knew that Alpha was a major nation in terms of magic, but she didn’t expect it to be to this degree. Suddenly, Exceles returned to her senses, and after clearing her throat, she made eye contact with her captain and poked her with her elbow.

Fanon finally pulled herself together, straightened her posture, and cut straight to the point. “L-Let us get back on topic. Why don’t we work together? Even if we leave pursuing those two to you, it’ll be a problem for us too if you screw it up. Or do you not want to needlessly complicate diplomatic relationships between our nations? Frankly, we don’t have a lot of time, in more than one way.”

It was a provocative statement, but Vizaist and Felinella quickly caught the nuance behind it. While the criminals’ intentions for infiltrating Alpha were unknown, Fanon and her squad were impatient because they felt it was quite possible that the criminals weren’t simply fleeing the scene of their crime. They might have a dangerous goal or motive, and their fuse was already lit.

After a moment of silence from Vizaist, who made it hard to tell whether or not he was deep in thought, Exceles added a few words to back up Fanon. “Have you already forgotten that we were the ones who rendered aid to the injured on Alpha’s side? If we were only acting in the best interest of our nation, we could have ignored them and used the chaos to infiltrate.”

That statement left Vizaist unable to do anything too forceful. Aiding the border guards was certainly a big favor in terms of international politics. If not for Fanon’s squad, the injured may all very well have lost their lives, so they should be showing Fanon’s squad some sincere appreciation.

Magical criminals crossing borders was becoming more and more common, and with the battle against Fiends in the Outer World, it was rough for a single nation to take responsibility for them all. There was no guarantee that their positions wouldn’t be reversed in the future. At least that was what Fanon and Exceles were hinting at.

They stopped there and waited for a reaction from Vizaist, who rubbed his chin and leaned his large body deeper into his chair, making it creak.

Felinella stood next to her father and glanced at his face, wondering if this was the point where they should reach an agreement. They had already obtained enough of an advantage, making the other side play many of their cards. More importantly, now wasn’t the time for her father to get involved in this kind of thing.

She’d only been listening in a little, but the other problem that Vizaist was dealing with was far beyond the scale of Fanon’s squad crossing the border. Therefore, she exceeded her own position to somewhat forcibly try to lead the situation to a conclusion.

At this point, they could just accept the Clevideet squad’s request, leaving international politics out of play unless Fanon’s group caused another problem. Yet her father was acting unusually cautious. Something was making him uneasy...

She was perplexed and couldn’t help but curse her lack of experience. Was it due to the intuition and knowledge that he had cultivated over the years? Or was there a deeper meaning to his unease that she hadn’t anticipated? Either

way, Felinella couldn't understand the reason for her father's hesitation.

After thinking some more, Vizaist finally made up his mind and spoke. "Hmm, very well. We can't fulfill all of your requests, but we will cooperate in the investigation. For just these criminals, you will have the right to investigate. I will speak with the Governor-General later to make it official."

Relief washed over Exceles's face. This moment was like the first step after climbing to the peak of a long and painful mountain pass. "Thank you very much. By the way, you said that you can not oblige us in full, but how much will you accept?"

But then, as if to get the better of Exceles, Vizaist harshly interrupted her. "No, you will have to start first. We are grateful for your aid to the border guards. But even so, I would like you to understand that our response to your request is based solely on our goodwill."

"Excuse me." After a pause, Exceles once again explained the tragedy in Clevideet in detail, more in-depth than before. She noted that they were attacked by two outlaws during their day off and that, while the goal was unknown, there was a possibility that Fanon herself had been the target.

They also explained the highly destructive magic that had been used, which had caused severe damage to the human habitation, and that so many had died that it would take time to get an accurate count. Exceles went through each point in detail in a vehement tone, denouncing the vicious crimes, while Vizaist quietly listened. While she didn't know how much he'd take their circumstances into consideration, she hoped her harsh tone would be effective. The emotional display would also help to conceal their secret mission to reclaim the AWRs.

Once Exceles finished explaining, Vizaist said in a solemn tone, "I see, I can understand your situation. But let me ask again, what are their names and private information? I imagine they are the ones who attacked the border guard."

But it wasn't Exceles who answered. Fanon took a step forward. "Gordon Empetcross. And the other is called Suzar Hanbal. As we were pursuing them, the incident on the border happened. Exceles was tracking them until that point, so there's no doubt about it."

Vizaist's eyes narrowed for a moment, expression grave, then he slowly opened his mouth. "That would be the warden and vice warden of the Trojan Prison. In that case, private information won't be necessary."

That shook Exceles. It saved her the trouble of explaining, but she was shocked that he already knew that much.

After that, Vizaist suddenly became more cooperative, and he leaned his large body forward to ask, "Do you have any recent information on the Trojan Prison?"

"None. If anything, as we were attacked by Gordon, we are the first to pursue them. Well, I'm sure that there's an investigative team in place to find out what happened, but they won't reach the Trojan Prison for two or three days. But if you're asking, I take it you don't have any information either."

Vizaist neither confirmed nor denied it. Instead, he nodded and signaled Felinella, signaling her to share the information she had stuffed into her head before the documents were disposed of.

Felinella spoke up, careful not to let the existence of the disposed documents be known. "If we combine your information with ours, then it is very likely that most of the Trojan Prison's convicts have escaped. We have noted a few individuals to be particularly wary of."

Felinella briefly listed the names of the people that she had memorized, this time with the addition of Gordon and Suzar.

Felinella continued, speaking to herself. "If the prison's warden and vice warden didn't apprehend the criminals but instead came to Clevideet and attacked...then it only makes sense that they instigated the prison break."

"If you think about it normally." Fanon nodded along.

Vizaist also made a conjecture. "If they were after Fanon, then it is possible that it has been planned for a long time. If Gordon has some sort of grudge against Fanon, it must have happened before becoming the warden."

"But I don't remember that filthy man's face. But he was probably a pretty high-ranking Magicmaster from our nation," Fanon said, like it didn't concern her.

Exceles shrugged her shoulders and added a few more words. "I think it's problematic for a Single to be so free-spirited. Honestly, it wouldn't be strange for a lot of people to have grudges against Lady Fanon without her knowledge." Exceles's eyes moved to Vizaist as she continued with a nod. "Those two are indeed Magicmasters from Clevideet. I hear that Gordon in particular was a candidate to become a Single. Back then, he was disciplined and loyal, and even called a model patriot. But then he gave up his position and became a warden, perhaps having gotten caught up in a political dispute."

Vizaist and Felinella caught on to what Exceles was saying.

"In other words, it wouldn't be unreasonable for him to think that he was put in the job. Maybe he was dissatisfied with being treated so coldly. Yes. Any acquaintance with Lady Fanon aside, if he was a candidate to become a Single in the past, he might have some fixation with the position. Meanwhile, Suzar is his subordinate, so he is only accompanying his superior," Exceles said and then fell silent.

Regardless of what Gordon was after, she couldn't let it slip that they had attacked Area 90 and stolen some AWRs.

Felinella spoke up. "However, as mentioned, those two are believed to have entered Alpha. The question of why they would come to our nation where the security is so tight is unclear, but they must have some sort of goal in mind."

Felinella glanced over to her father, and after receiving his wordless acknowledgment, she played one of their cards. It wasn't exactly a gift in return, but she had decided that it was information that was best to be shared.

"We have already confirmed that there are four other escapees that have entered Alpha," said Vizaist.

"Interesting. So they gathered rather than scattered?"

Felinella nodded at Fanon's words. "Yes. Normally they should have scattered through all seven nations to split up their pursuers, so this is baffling."

"Well, either way that's convenient for us. We can just round them all up in one go. Of course, like Exceles said, you are the ones who have jurisdiction in Alpha. I won't overstep my boundaries, and I want to focus on just one job. So I

will leave the escaped prisoners in your hands, and we will handle Gordon and Suzar. But if I do come across some on the road to them, I will take care of them too. Are you fine with that?" Fanon asked with a fearless smile, resembling that of a ferocious predator.

Her words showed her absolute pride in the power that set her apart from the rest and made her the rank 4 Magicmaster. So Fanon's words weren't pushing them to make a decision, so much as telling them that there was only one option.

But Vizaist responded in a solemn tone. "No, we have our own position to consider. So we will accept your help, but we cannot publicly cooperate with you. And make sure to remember that we will not tolerate any fighting that would cause human casualties. If that were to happen, we would have to apprehend you. I will now explain the measures that we will take."

His words were stern, but he was essentially saying that they would cooperate, just not in public.

Vizaist was maintaining a state of tension between soldiers of two nations on the surface, but behind the scenes they would be working with Fanon on certain matters.

But the conditions made Fanon's cheek twitch. While it was unavoidable, it felt like having reached a point of no return only to do an about-face. Normally they'd be sent right back to their nation, so Fanon could only nod. It would inevitably put restrictions on their actions within Alpha, but some sacrifice was necessary.

On the Alpha side, this was the natural conclusion. They had information on escaped prisoners in their nation, and Fanon and her squad brought information of the wardens entering their nation. Those wardens had even destroyed the border watchtower and the surrounding communications network. Naturally, anyone would get the hint.

On top of everything else, Vizaist was currently very busy. He'd take any help that he could get, and use anything he could. That was his simple conclusion, but by putting on airs, he was able to extract information from the other party and even made them accept restrictions on their movements.

Seeing her father at work, Felinella realized she had a long way to go. That said, she didn't think the hesitation he had shown just before was part of his game.

Maintaining his dignity, Vizaist slowly spoke up. "Hmm, we will send out a skilled tracker to apprehend the culprits. They will, of course, be after the escaped convicts, but if they come across your targets, we will hand them over to you unconditionally. After that, this affair should be settled."

Tsk, so that's what he's after?! Fanon clicked her tongue in her mind.

Exceles and Fanon both felt that it was a superb proposal, but they couldn't honestly nod at it. The tracker Vizaist had mentioned would likely not just be out to apprehend the escaped convicts, but would also to keep them in check.

Vizaist was hoping to keep Fanon and her squad from going too far. In other words, he wanted to use the pretext of cooperation to prevent them from going too far. And both nations would save face by not looking like they needed other nations to help solve their own problems. If they also happened to catch Gordon and Suzar before Fanon could, they would be able to create a diplomatic debt.

On Fanon's side, if Gordon and Suzar were captured by Alpha first, Alpha would find out about the stolen AWRs and gain another card to play diplomatically. This meant they would have to race to capture the criminals, which was probably what Vizaist was after.

At the moment, Vizaist shouldn't know about the stolen AWRs, but he might have seen Fanon's strange fixation on Gordon and Suzar and sensed that something was up. The secret mission may have been only half of the reason for Fanon's fixation—her injured pride and forehead being the other half—but Vizaist's intuition was sharp.

Fanon wrinkled her brow and fell silent, so Exceles, acting in her stead, bowed and gave her thanks. "Lord Socalent, we thank you for your consideration."

Preferring pragmatic and rational decisions, Exceles determined that at the end of the day they just needed to get to Gordon and Suzar before the other side did. And with Vizaist being as shrewd as he was, if they turned him down here, they would probably only bring unnecessary trouble upon themselves.

“I only wish that we could do more,” Vizaist said, but Fanon and Exceles both knew he didn’t mean a word of it. With the talks coming to an end, it seemed that Vizaist was the sole winner. “By the way, is there anyone among you who is knowledgeable about Alpha?”

“No, our main theater of war is the Outer World.” Even though she had a bad feeling about doing so, Exceles answered Vizaist’s question honestly.

“Then I will have my daughter, Felinella, guide you. It would appear that Ms. Fanon dislikes men with rugged faces. And I can see how a man would stand out in this group, not to mention that the Socalent family name should help in protecting your secrets,” said Vizaist.

“You really do think of everything and anything...” Exceles managed to keep a strained smile and her real feelings pushed down. It was like they were the prisoners, and they were going for a picnic with a warden. It really was just a nice-sounding excuse for someone watching their every move.

Fanon may have been a Single Digit Magicmaster, but Vizaist didn’t seem to give it much weight. Perhaps that was just because of the nation they were in. Alpha had the rank 1 after all, so Vizaist gave off the impression that he knew how to handle Singles. Perhaps it would have been better to have a noble or even the ruler mediate for them.

“Then everything’s been decided. Of course, if we learn anything new, we will share it with you,” one of Vizaist’s subordinates said as a formality.

The arrangements were steadily being finalized with all communication going through Felinella; there were no openings for Fanon or Exceles to take advantage of. Felinella looked at Vizaist with a dissatisfied face. “What are we going to do about the message to Mr. Alus, Father?”

“You will have to give up on that. The situation has changed. I will leave it to my subordinates, including a report to Berwick. Or will you abandon an important mission to deliver it yourself?” Vizaist asked with a grin, so Felinella frowned and turned her head away.

“Well, I won’t ask that you stick with Ms. Fanon at all times. If you see a good opening, you can leave for Alus,” said Vizaist.

That would mean having nobody to keep an eye on Fanon's squad, but Vizaist didn't think it was a big deal. That said, Felinella did want a word or two from her father about being away from the Institute for several days, not that studies concerned her much now.

In terms of knowledge, she had already learned everything at the Second Magical Institute. Her only concern was that her lack of attendance might lower her grades.

"I understand. If I have time," she said, leaving it at that. But her father's chuckle suggested that he had seen right through her.

After that, the topic turned to using the old house they were in as a temporary base, but the details were left in the air. Not even Felinella had known about the location, so it wouldn't be discovered by just anyone. However, it did seem like they would need to disinfect and decorate it to Fanon's liking.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Lady Fanon. I am Felinella Socalent, and I will be working as your guide. I look forward to working with you," Felinella politely greeted Fanon, who replied with a proud look.

"Well, you don't have to force yourself. Besides, we already have an idea on how to capture them. It might be more nerve-racking than in the Outer World, but we probably won't have to use much mana," Fanon casually said, her eyes on the rank 1 Spotter, Exceles.

Spotter or not, a Magicmaster in the single digits had abilities that were veiled in mystery. Even Alpha's Rinne Kimmel's magic eyes were only known to a handful within Alpha. But Felinella was interested in what sort of methods the top Spotter used.

They did come all this way tracking the two attackers, she thought.

She didn't know how their targets had escaped the spotter's web, but they had definitely been caught up in it at some point. So Felinella knew that Fanon's confidence was not without basis. Not to mention that Exceles and the others showed no cracks, as was expected of a Single's squad.

If the timing allows for it, I wonder if I will be able to relay that message to Mr.

Alus.

Felinella had no intention of cutting corners, but based on her father's attitude and behavior, she was sure she didn't need to keep too close of an eye on this group. And knowing her father, there wasn't much chance any harm could come to Alpha, regardless of outcome. But his momentary hesitation did concern her.

It was only natural that he would be cautious, which was why he wanted her to be with Fanon's squad. But she couldn't grasp monitoring so lax a mission. *Maybe Father doesn't have any specific concerns; maybe he just avoided making any snap decisions because of his intuition? In that case, is attaching me to Lady Fanon just a form of insurance...?* she wondered.

That only made her feel like she'd been taken advantage of, but lately she had had her hands full with incidents around Alus and had even come into contact with the ruler. Just finding her father's hideout had been a pain, so this lax mission was like taking a break. So perhaps it was just her father being considerate.

Once she started thinking along that line, she could only let out a small sigh. If it really was her father being considerate, that would be welcome, but she still couldn't fully let her guard down just yet.

Eighty-First Chapter

Atrocious Beasts

In the Institute, students typically obtained credits for attendance and exam scores, and regular exams had been held since Alus had returned to the Institute. For that reason, Alus had put some effort into securing the minimum number of attendance and exam scores, but his recent behavior had been too far from student-like.

The reason, of course, was all the trouble that had been falling into his lap. But it made him give up on worrying about attendance, and he already hadn't had motivation to earn high marks on pointless tests.

"They were supposed to be flexible, but the teachers who didn't know anything about it objected and said they've reached their limits. It's way too unreasonable to not get any credits just because I don't have good enough attendance," Alus complained.

"Well, that's true...but you know, they say that a student's main job is to study," Tesfia said, agreeing with him, expression bitter.

But it wasn't enough to vent his frustration. "I don't get it. I got full marks on the test, and it still wasn't enough. So are teachers satisfied with students who don't score well but attend their lessons? If they call themselves first-rate teachers for that, then..."

"Then what?" asked Tesfia.

"Alpha has a dark future. Reluctantly or not, I was a fool to accept Berwick's claims. Maybe this nation should just fall to ruin." After saying that, Alus sloppily slumped over his desk. Today was the final day in a series of exams.

He'd held on to the vague hope that getting perfect scores would help, but after the exams, he'd learned that there was a rule that said he needed to have attended a bare minimum of days to get credits. He'd been overcome with

hopelessness. After finishing his exams, he returned to his laboratory, but everything felt futile.

“Sir Alus, this doesn’t mean that you will have to repeat a year,” Loki comforted him, putting a cup of tea on his desk. The steaming cup was her way of showing she cared. It had a citrusy aroma with a strong Earl Grey flavor.

Loki lacked attendance like Alus, but she had come to terms with it. Seeing how calm she was, he felt like a child for complaining about the Institute’s regulations, but it just didn’t sit right with him.

“I’ll have to turn to my last resort. If I reveal my rank to everyone, the principal and Governor-General will have to make a move...”

“There you go clinging to authority again. You can’t let yourself get desperate,” Alice said somewhat slowly to keep from sounding too critical. But it wasn’t like Alus was serious. The only reason there hadn’t been an uproar yet was because his rank hadn’t been exposed.

“She’s right. If you do that, then why have we gone all this time keeping Sir Alus’s rank hidden? Things will definitely become a lot more troublesome,” Loki calmly stated the obvious, admonishing him.

Alus snorted and slumped over his desk again. The test results would be posted in a few days, and since Alus had taken part, he would also be graded. Partially to harass the teachers, Alus had solved all the questions with complete explanations, and in some cases pointed out the ambiguity of the question.

“There’s no way they would give a student who gets a perfect score no credit. I would love to see the face of such an insolent faculty member,” he said.

“You’re still at it? You’ve been to their lectures, so you’ve already seen them.” Tesfia was composed, having seemingly done well in the exams. But since she knew his situation, she wasn’t talking back like usual. “Although I could understand how they would feel conflicted giving credits to a student who can’t even remember them.”

“That has nothing to do with it,” he said. “Besides, I’d rather pass on these basic-level lectures that aren’t even practical. But they’re playing dirty. How can not giving me credits even if I get a perfect score be anything but harassment?”

Well, not that I really care about their trivial lessons.”

Alus realized that he was complaining just like any normal student, and it struck him how pointless it was. He couldn't deny that he felt bitter, but it would be better to change gears.

“Why don't we go to the training grounds after this so that you can take a look at the results of our training?”

Alus smiled bitterly as Tesfia seemed to read his mind. “Don't be in such a rush. Even if we go now, there's no guarantee that the training ground is open. I know. Why don't we do it here instead? It'll be a good diversion too.”

“Sir Alus, doing it here is a little...” Loki hurriedly tried to stop them. The laboratory had all sorts of chemicals and precision instruments. If a spell were to run rampant, it would be quite costly. Of course, the accessories and cutlery that Loki had gathered wouldn't make it out in one piece either.

“Well, they've trained their mana control for so long, I doubt anything serious would happen. Besides, this could provide some training for me too,” said Alus.

“What do you mean?”

Alus glanced at Tesfia and Alice before answering Loki's question. “If they were to fail, I would immediately interfere with the construct and destroy the spell by force before it could manifest. Well, it's mostly Fia who messes up. Just in case, I'll keep Night Mist by my side.”

“So that's what you mean. I understand,” said Loki. Lately, Tesfia had been training in putting together spells, so rampant spells from her were certainly the biggest cause for concern.

Seeing Loki nod in the corner of his vision, Alus moved to the sofa to watch over the two girls, relocating various papers and materials to the table. He would look over those while watching these two train. Because there was an enormous amount of material to quote and reference, Alus couldn't waste any time, leading him to conduct multiple researches simultaneously.

Once Alus was seated on the sofa, Tesfia and Alice got straight to training. And for some reason, Loki sat down next to Alus. “By the way, Sir Alus, how are these two's training progressing?” she asked.

“Not much has changed since last time. And I can’t say how your independent training is going,” he responded, glancing at the girl next to him. He took a short breath before continuing. “Well, thinking about it normally, Alice will pick it up quicker than Fia. She’s quick once she picks up the knack to something. Fia is, well...”

Right then, Alus saw something fly through the air with great force. Immediately afterwards, a deafening noise rang out.

“Ahh! What am I going to do...?!” Alice held her golden spear to her chest, petrified, her face pale.

Part of her golden spear, Shangdi Fides, had flown past Alus, crashed into a cupboard with all of its momentum, destroying the glass door...before slowly sliding down and falling over.

“Now you’ve done it!” Tesfia exclaimed in a panic, but Alus didn’t seem to particularly mind. In fact, he said, “It’s unusual for Alice to be the one to screw up. Well, just save the cleaning up for later and continue training.”

Fortunately, nothing of any real importance had broken. That cupboard was where they pushed everything unnecessary.

“I-I’m sorry.” Alice shrank away.

“Ms. Alice, you really don’t have to worry about it. Sir Alus brought up training her, so the only misfortune is that it happened after I cleaned up,” Loki said to patch things up.

“Right. I’m sorry; I’ll clean it right up...” Alice tried to hurry to the cupboard, but Alus forcibly stopped her.

“Don’t do anything else during training,” he said. “You’ll ruin your focus. You’ve got the essentials, so success or failure, just reflect on things first.”

“O-Okay...” stammered Alice.

“By the way, Alice, you asked Fia about figuring out spatial coordinates, didn’t you?” asked Alus.

“Yeah, how did you know?” asked Alice.

“While it’s true that using Fia’s approach for Zepel and its spatial coordinates

could be effective for your own training, there's a difference in your personal natures. And that approach requires a great deal of sense, so try this instead." Alus held out a hand with his thumb, index finger and middle finger held high.

Alice copied it with her own hand.

"The three fingers show the x-, y-, and z-axes," Alus explained. "And the combination of the fluctuating mana that runs through these axes creates a field that shows the directionality of the mana. Keep that form in mind and use just your three fingers to control the circle. Once you can make complex maneuvers with one circle, increase the numbers by one until you can handle all three. When you get used to that, try bending your finger joints, or crossing them and such."

As Alice stared intently at her hand, Alus continued, "For example, try bending and stretching your thumb up and down. Incorporate those instructions into your AWR. It'll be double the effort, but it's worth it to get used to handling it initially. As the AWR becomes accustomed to its user's mana, the repeated motion will naturally become optimized, and eventually you will be able to move the circles with just the image in your head."

Alice's AWR was split into the golden spear part and the circle parts, and they could act independently.

The spear and circles were split, but they were made from the same meteor metal, making it very easy to work with.

"Okay, I'll give it a try!" said Alice. After just fixing the collapsed cupboard, Alice turned her back on the shards and objects to get back to training.

Once Alus had finished explaining, Loki gently leaned close. "So going back to the previous question—how are the two progressing?"

Perhaps rivalry motivated her persistent questioning. But they each had their own obstacles and difficulties, so there was no point in competing. On top of that, Loki's task was leagues more difficult than theirs.

"I'd say that Alice is about thirty percent of the way. Once she gets a hang of it, she'll finish quickly. And I can't say for sure when it comes to Fia, but I'd guess around fifty percent," said Alus.

“Are we talking about the same Ms. Tesfia?!” Loki gazed in wonderment and brought her face even closer. Alus inserted a hand between them to block her, but he could understand her surprise. For starters, Tesfia had been tasked with learning Cocytus, which wasn’t the kind of spell one could learn with just a little bit of effort. And limiting its effective area to the tip of a finger didn’t make it any easier to learn.

Knowing Tesfia was listening in while training, Alus continued, “Did you see her mock battle against Lilisha? There was a moment where she suddenly changed, wasn’t there.”

“Yes, the air around her changed...” said Loki.

“On top of that, her mana itself changed. She didn’t follow the construction for Cocytus, but she created a similar effect,” Alus recalled, thinking of that day as he explained. Tesfia had been cornered in her match against Lilisha when she succeeded in freezing Lilisha’s mana steel thread, despite the other girl’s skilled handling of the threads and clear advantage in mana control.

Frankly, it had been beyond her capability to interfere with the thread, yet she had been able to do so anyways. It didn’t make much sense to Alus. There was no step in the process or activation of Cocytus that required one to change the quality of their own mana. All Alus could think was that there was something more to her than just talent.

“Maybe it was the third step of the Fable family’s inherited magic. Another formula that triggered by itself,” pondered Alus.

“Is something like that possible?” asked Loki.

Tesfia had stopped all pretense of practicing, but Alus didn’t answer Loki’s question. Instead, his consciousness sank into a sea of thoughts.

It was an interesting phenomenon. He thought back to the perfect magic Selva had mentioned. Alus believed that when it came to magic, humanity would never be able to beat Fiends. Humanity had tried all manners of methods to create complete magic, but he had a feeling that no matter how much they developed it, it would never be perfected.

Sure, there was meaning in continuing research, but people would eventually

reach their limits, while Fiends could control magic by their very being as their cores were its source. So they were experts in mana from birth, and while the weakest couldn't use it, their bodies were fully adapted to mana.

With that premise in mind, Alus pondered in what way the Fable family's inherited magic was perfect.

No matter what form, if it's perfect, it's not going to be something half-hearted, Alus thought to himself with a defiant smile. He then finally answered Loki's question.

"Well...I honestly couldn't say if it's possible. But there is a way to find out," Alus said, mostly directed towards the figure approaching behind him, who was all ears. He then turned around and looked into the eyes of the redhead standing there.

"Can I ask what kind of method that is? But please spare me any physical examinations," said Tesfia, likely referring to the examination Alice had received quite a while ago.

Alus pretended not to see Alice flinch at the mention. "Don't worry about it. You just have to lend me your AWR. And do you mind if I take it apart a little?"

"Excuse me?" Tesfia exclaimed in a bewildered voice. She furrowed her brow and looked at Alus suspiciously.

It was a pain, but since it was Tesfia's AWR, he couldn't just take it from her. "It's true that you are starting to become able to use something like Cocytus, but there's a lot that's left unexplained. It's dangerous to leave things as is without understanding it. I'm going to thoroughly look through the basic magic formulas engraved in the AWR. That means taking apart the grip."

"What? But will you put it back to normal?"

"I'm no expert, but I can make some AWRs myself, so I know how they work. And if it doesn't work, then we can just take it to Budna's workshop."

All sorts of expressions popped up on Tesfia's face, but after a few seconds, she agreed and passed him her katana. Alus brought his toolbox—which was just a box he'd stuffed with tools—over to the table and poured out its contents.

First, he pulled the AWR from its sheath and brought the blade up to his eye level, looking at it in detail. Tesfia had a rather unrefined side to her, so he'd figured that she wouldn't maintain it on a daily basis, but it was in surprisingly good condition. The blade didn't have a single blemish. The Fable family heirloom was nothing short of magnificent; it was worthy of its name.

It might not have used meteor metal, but it was no doubt made with the highest quality material. But even Alus's trained eye couldn't tell exactly what it was made out of. The more he observed it, the more he could see what an artistic masterpiece it was, and not just the katana itself.

"The placement of the magic formulas is very calculated too. Kikuri was its name, wasn't it?" he asked.

"You knew?" asked Tesfia.

"I heard about it from your mother. It's a strange name, but then again, I don't get the naming convention for katanas," answered Alus.

"Well, I don't really get the origin either. It's been used for generations," she responded.

Normally, a high-quality AWR was made to only ever have one user. A good AWR adapted to an individual's mana, creating habits that made it difficult for others to use. Frose Fable also knew that, which was probably why she'd left it as a blank slate.

"Mrs. Frose said that only the basic magic formula was engraved, with the attribute formula added later, but it's a little unnatural," Alus said, narrowing his eyes at the blade. He eventually noticed the peculiarity of the position of Kikuri's magic formulas—the connecting circuits necessary for the stable and smooth functioning of the basic magic and attribute formulas were placed in strange locations. Even though it was only really noticeable at a close inspection, he certainly felt that something was off. Next he turned to the grip. Finding the rivet, he used his tools to push it out.

"This is strange too," he mused.

"What is?" asked Tesfia.

"What? What?" At some point, Alice had shown up as well, and they all

watched Kikuri being taken apart.

“Take a look,” Alus said and handed the rivet to Tesfia.

“There’s some sort of characters,” she noted.

“It’s a combination of Lost Spells. They’re important characters for connecting magic formulas and serving as a connecting circuit. They’re pretty much obsolete now. New formulas have taken their place. But just for the record, you haven’t removed and completely replaced the rivet before have you?” Alus asked.

“No, I’ve just been maintaining it like normal.”

“I see. It seems to be made of a special metal as well,” said Alus.

Some sword smiths used bamboo as rivets so that they wouldn’t rust. Since the rivet held the grip and the blade together, it would normally be worn down as the blade was swung. Yet despite Tesfia’s frequent use of Kikuri, there was no sign of wear and tear on the rivet. It looked like it had been replaced just yesterday.

“You are well informed, Sir Alus,” Loki said, impressed.

“It’s only knowledge on the surface level,” Alus said. And he wasn’t being modest either. AWRs had evolved, and in the present, there weren’t any workshops that made katanas as a base for them. It was too time-consuming and only people of specific tastes would buy them, so the few that were in circulation fetched sky-high prices. According to Budna, it was simple to copy the shape of a katana, but there was a world of difference in strength and workmanship between one made by an amateur and one made by a professional.

With the rivet removed, Alus put his hand on the grip to remove it. With a sliding sound, the grip settled neatly in his hand. He looked at it again, and it was just as he’d expected—a Lost Spell was engraved into the edge, or so-called “tang,” of the katana. It looked strangely rigid, as if it had been engraved on a note protecting the blade.

“Normally, this is where the name of the swordsmith who struck the katana is placed...” said Alus.

“What is this? A magic formula?” Tesfia leaned over the sofa and took a closer look. She’d had no knowledge of its existence.

“Yeah, it’s a magic formula, all right. But part of it uses some characters I’ve never seen before,” said Alus. Yet he felt like he’d seen it before, however, not directly with his own eyes. It was a vague, fragmented record sunk within the depths of his memories.

The Akashic Records... It’s my first time seeing these characters, yet I remember them. It must have been because I saw that, thought Alus.

When he had fought the Shem Azah in Vanalis, it had fired giant, black stakes. They had contained massive amounts of mana, and when he had touched one, it had flooded his mind with the heights of knowledge—or perhaps nonsensical information—showing Alus memories that didn’t belong to him.

He’d felt a strange sensation as he reached a new level of understanding magic formulas.

But it wasn’t like he had learned how to understand the formulas. Instead, it was like he had come to be able to naturally decipher certain formulas that he hadn’t been able to before, as if he’d learned a language that bridged the gap between the unknown and himself. And as a result, it converted the knowledge regardless of Alus’s intentions and sent it through his mind.

It was a strange sensation, as if somebody were stirring up his brain. It felt like a storage space had been added to his brain, containing the records extracted from the Akashic Records. Shaking himself free from the chaotic sensation, Alus’s consciousness returned to reality.

“Loki,” he said, which was enough for her to understand what he wanted. With a small camera for research in hand, she took pictures of the strange magic formula. “These will be records to analyze. It might have some sort of influence on your training.”

After receiving Tesfia’s permission, Alus looked over Kikuri once again. There was nothing strange about the guard, so it seemed that the magic formula hidden by the grip had some sort of function.

“There was a strange atmosphere for a moment during your mock battle

against Lilisha. As if you'd entered a trance. Your consciousness and memories of that time are vague, right? This might be the reason for that. Well, it doesn't feel like it has any negative influences," Alus said, reversing the process and putting the blade and grip back together, firmly driving the rivet back in. "There you go, back to normal. By the way, does Mrs. Frose know about this odd construction?"

"Don't know. This is my first time seeing it, so I have no idea if my mother knew about it." Tesfia shook her head, taking her katana back.

"Still, the incident with Lilisha happened just after you started learning Cocytus," noted Alus. It was hard to believe that it was unrelated.

Up until that point, Tesfia's magic could be handled by the magic formulas engraved on her blade. So perhaps that hidden magic formula covered a different branch of magic, with a differing effect.

As far as Alus could tell, it wasn't an attribute formula but closer to an individual magic formula.

That said, the modern orthodox style for individual magic formulas was not being followed, and the composition was original to a large degree. Even with Alus's knowledge he didn't know what role the unknown Lost Spells served in the magic formula.

"Well, back to training. This is a Fable family heirloom, and it shows no signs of anyone having used it. No quirks have been created either, so there shouldn't be any harm in using it. It's not like it's some occult story about a cursed katana anyways."

AWRs absorbed mana information and put it through an algorithm to analyze and adapt itself to its user.

In order to accomplish that, they were built not just with sturdy materials but with excellent mana conductivity.

"Yes, it wouldn't be strange for it to be special since it's an heirloom. And if there's no problem with that strange magic formula, then it's all fine." Tesfia nodded, having always used the katana.

Looking at that carefree face, Alus thought to himself, *But it might be a*

different story if this is related to the inherited magic. Mr. Selva cautioned me too, so I guess I'll keep an eye on it.

Of course, he would take a much closer look at the magic formula later. Alus felt like he'd found a fun toy to play with after digging through an old treasure chest.

"Don't you have any advice for me...?" Tesfia greedily looked at Alus, who was acting like everything was settled.

She wanted to take advantage of the situation to receive some advice, just like Alice would do. That troubled Alus, and he pretended to think for a moment. He considered some rudimentary advice, like the ideal stance for learning magic and such.

Like he mentioned before, Cocytus wasn't some sort of spell that could be mastered just because one understood the logic behind it. Suddenly, Alus came up with something and decided to try proposing it.

"In your case, you need enough mana to strongly interfere with space, and it must be the ice attribute at that. In practice, that means space in its entirety. In other words, the very concept of information needs to be frozen," said Alus.

"Okay, and then?!" Tesfia was completely into it, so Alus grabbed a nearby paper.

He drew several lines on it, creating a checkered pattern. "To give you a clue, let's divide space into small cubes. This is just to give you an image, so they don't all have to be the exact size. For the sake of convenience you can assign numbers to them, and then you specify their coordinates and freeze them in order. Even if you don't freeze it, as long as there are signs of magic manifesting within the blocks, that's fine."

"So recognizing space and freezing it... Hmm, I can understand the logic behind it, but not how to actually do it," Tesfia said, folding her arms and furrowing her brow.

But since it had to be done, her worries didn't matter, and Alus continued explaining. "A space is not a void. This is rudimentary training to recognize the

axes of coordinates and your mana's point of action, the very concept of space itself. It's important to understand that it's not a line or a plane, but a three-dimensional space."

"Hmmm, now it's harder to understand than before. How exactly am I supposed to freeze space?" asked Tesfia.

"Like this," Alus casually said and snapped his fingers. The area before them was filled with cold air, and with a crackling sound, something was given shape. Tesfia's eyes opened wide as a cube of ice appeared. It emitted a blue, cold light that was frozen in midair, as if suspended by string.

"This is remaining unmoving because I'm maintaining the coordinates even after manifesting it, but this is just child's play. You couldn't even call this a spell," said Alus. "In your case, you will pass if you can fill a cubic area with cold air."

"Got it! With the exams over, I can really get into this!" Tesfia was visibly motivated. She seemed to have completely forgotten about the Tenbram. Then again, the training would come in handy for that too, so Alus decided not to dash her motivation.

But that aside, as far as Alus could tell, the freezing magic that Tesfia had used against Lilisha wasn't something she could currently use. When he looked at the results of it, it seemed to be some half-assed expert-level spell, like it had taken apart Cocytus and only manifested part of it.

I see, Alus thought, wondering why he hadn't noticed. Just as Mistlotein was created by overwriting other expert-level spells, it was possible that Tesfia had unconsciously tampered with some magic formula. Of course, she didn't have the knowledge or technique to pull that off, so it made sense to assume that she had some sort of guidance or assistance. And the first thing that came to mind was her AWR. It was highly likely that Kikuri had unique capabilities.

Alus was also bothered by the fact that it had supposedly been held by the heirs of the Fable family for generations. *I'd love to give it a proper inspection some time*, Alus thought.

In the normal AWR market, universal products were put through tests to ensure that they functioned properly before being sold. However, that was the

buyer's own responsibility when it came to custom-made AWRs, and they were either put through a special inspection agency or simply tested themselves. Alus had the devices necessary for that in his laboratory, so he could perform some specialized testing.

Meanwhile, Tesfia got right back to training. Focusing on the advice she'd been given, she constructed her magic, one step at a time. But like Alus had pointed out, she gave up on trying to construct the spell completely, and was doing a simple reproduction instead. Focusing on the coordinates particularly, she abbreviated the other construction elements.

Shortly after she started, the temperature in the room dropped as cold air spread. Alice, who had been holding her breath while watching, shuddered. She was hit with the cold air at close range and was rubbing her arms for warmth. While the control left much to be desired, to Alus, it was a good first attempt.

"That's the spirit. Now you just have to precisely manifest the cold air within the block and then shift over to the coordinates of the next block and slowly expand the area where the cold air is generated. But don't let up on your mana control," said Alus.

"Of course. If anything, I couldn't do this without mana control," said Tesfia.

"From what I can tell, you are not doing much different from repeatedly casting the same magic, and if you don't put some mana into it, it won't last for long," Loki added a plausible explanation. She seemed to have gotten flustered from Tesfia's rapid growth and wanted to flaunt her knowledge.

"Yeah, that's right." Alus nodded. Loki looked at him with a small, expectant smile, waiting for him to praise her.

Alus felt compelled to commend Loki in some way. However, Loki was a Magicmaster who had fought on the front lines. Unlike a student like Tesfia, more was expected from her.

Hmm, should I tell her not to get full of herself over something like that? No, that'd be no different than some drill instructor. Alus simulated saying a couple of theatrical lines in his mind, but couldn't help but feel self-conscious.

In the end, he decided to wordlessly put his hand on her head. Loki

immediately broke out into a big smile, and he pretended not to notice.

“Well, there you have it. Good luck. If you don’t proceed efficiently, you won’t be making any progress,” said Alus.

“Don’t worry! Leave it to me!” Tesfia declared smugly, earning a chop on the top of her head from Alus. “Ow?!”

With that, the cold air in the room dissipated. “That’s what you get for getting full of yourself. Get back to training,” he said.

While they were speaking, Alice’s circle flew off, desiring freedom once more. But this time before it could destroy something, a rodlike object sprang up through its center, stopping it. Alus had done the opposite of a ring toss, creating a rod of mana and passing it through the ring.

“Looks like Alice has some difficulties ahead of her as well,” said Alus with a small sigh. Alice scratched her cheek as if to apologize.

The two girls trained intensely for two hours after that, taking a break in the middle. Once they were done with that and had cleaned up, they returned to the girls’ dorm in time for dinner.

Loki was in the middle of preparing dinner herself when she suddenly stopped and hesitatingly started speaking. “Sir Alus, uhm...I would like to consult with you about something.”

“Hmm? What?” Alus wanted to ask why she’d waited for the other two to leave, but seeing Loki’s expression, he swallowed those words.

Even if Loki was his partner and they were living together, it didn’t mean he could just say whatever came to mind. It wasn’t like he was looking to be called considerate, but he’d learned some things since they began living together. Alus could sense his own growth. The steady passage of time had been a source of nourishment for him. But Alus put that aside as he looked at Loki’s serious expression and listened to what she had to say.

“It’s about that spell...”

He’d expected it would be related to magic based on her behavior. Alus sat down at the chair of his desk and straightened himself up. It was almost

certainly about the vertex of thunder that she was currently learning, which was an ultimate-level lightning attribute spell, and top secret at that. It was a difficult spell to learn, even for Alus. In fact, he had borrowed the magic formula from a top secret database.

Of course, Alus didn't have much of an affinity for the lightning attribute, so he didn't have much interest in thunder spells. Black Ikazuchi was among the least efficient spells that Alus had. With mana consumption differing so much between affinities, even if he did learn the spell, he wouldn't be able to use it outside of special circumstances.

Loki appeared a little impatient. Seeing Tesfia's and Alice's growth must have stimulated her sense of rivalry.

"I was thinking about Fire Ikazuchi, but based on the structural elements of the magic formula and the amount of information, uhm, is it even possible for a human to use this?" asked Loki. "I imagine that you are the only one who could learn this, Sir Alus..."

Alus had known Loki for a while, but this was the first time he'd seen her like this. Strangely enough, despite how she was speaking, it didn't seem like she'd given up. He didn't think she'd commit a taboo like using a catalyst again, but it seemed she had her thoughts on the matter.

"It's true. Other spells can't compare with the amount of information. Frankly, the details are practically a mystery," said Alus. Being based on an old magic formula, it was difficult to even adjust the spell's efficiency.

In the modern age, efficiency was key in magic formulas. Simplifications were fine, but old magic was the exception. Coming from an age during which any high-level spells were kept hidden, they were all quite original in their construction.

The balance of the spell being built resembled elaborate stone towers, each with a different design philosophy behind them. Even parts that appeared irrational at first glance often played an important role somewhere. That made it difficult for a third party to make any adjustments, as it might inadvertently ruin the whole thing.

That was especially true for Fire Ikazuchi, as it could have completely

unpredictable results. It was not like modern magic, which typically followed the same rules. Because of that, it was possible to understand the effects of a spell just by looking at its magic formula.

But Fire Ikazuchi and other old spells were exceptions. Although with Alus's ability to decipher Lost Spells through brute force, it might be possible.

"Magic formulas are not entirely set in stone, and there is room for interpretation, depending on the user's talent and understanding. Well, it's a mysterious part about magic." Alus paused and asked Loki, "You didn't give up out of desperation did you?"

She nodded, "Yes, it's about this part of the formula. It has some of the fire attribute mixed in, which has a big influence on this and this part."

Surprisingly, Loki had studied the magic formula thoroughly and deepened her understanding. It was clear that she was making an effort to read and understand each and every part of the formula. But that required a specialist's level of knowledge, so it was a little difficult for Loki, so she asked Alus for help.

"I don't believe the attribute formulas on the AWRs I have on hand are enough to complement the formula," Loki said, pulling out one of her knife AWRs and handing it to Alus. It was clearly meticulously cared for and didn't have a single smudge on it.

"Well, Fire Ikazuchi is a composite spell, making it particularly difficult. However, there's a limit to how much this formula can be tinkered with. That said, it would be impossible to fit into a single formula," said Alus.

All of Loki's knives were engraved with identical magic formulas, therefore they could be treated like a single AWR. But when it came to handling multiple types of magic or composite spells, they were lacking in versatility.

"And so, uhm." Loki, seemingly at a loss of what to say, put her shoulders against Alus and pointed at the AWR. "Please wait a minute."

Suddenly, Loki noticed something and pushed herself away from Alus, smelling her shoulders. That alone was enough to tell what was on her mind.

"I-It's fine." Alus wasn't crude enough to ask what was up. Just cleaning up after Alice's destruction wouldn't have been enough for her to work up a sweat.

“You smell as good as always,” he said, trying to patch things up.

“What does ‘as always’ mean?!” Loki exclaimed, strangely persistent despite there being nothing to worry about.

“I don’t know. Your shampoo?” asked Alus.

“But you use the same shampoo, Sir Alus,” said Loki.

“Hmm? I guess so. I suppose you can’t tell yourself,” he said.

Even trivial chatter seemed to be necessary communication to Loki, as now she pushed close enough to Alus for their shoulders to almost touch. “Ahem, so anyways, I was thinking of adding this beneath the attribute formula. Only on one of course.”

Loki pulled out a memo out of the desk with ease. Studying magic formulas she was unused to must have been a lot of work. Her trial and error was quite apparent.

But it was his field of expertise, so he thoroughly checked it. It had the typical impractical cherry-picked ideas of an amateur and constructs based on optimistic assumptions. However, it was worth a look, because while faint it had a concrete image of a spell.

“Oh? So you interpreted and gave form to Fire Ikazuchi?” Alus asked. The unpolished string of characters Loki had made showed a clear path for putting together a spell with a proper image of the finished product.

“H-How is it? This was the only method I could think of replicating it but...will a crude magic formula like this work?” asked Loki. She was like a severely self-conscious student coming to a veteran professor to ask rudimentary questions, but Alus gave her idea full marks. The diligent student’s brilliance was almost enough to move one to tears.

The crude magic formula was diligently put together, and it tickled Alus’s scholarly spirit. His brain was already beginning to spin at full speed, jumping between different ideas and logical conclusions. He instantaneously assembled a hypothetical magic formula and then took it apart to see if there was room to fit the formula somewhere.

Repeating that trial-and-error process, Alus was fully invested in resolving the problem that should have been Loki's assignment. And that led him to say, "It wouldn't be impossible. If anything, you should forcibly try to incorporate it. This is an interesting point of view, appropriating the core construct of summoning magic. But it won't work like this. And it will all be for naught if it hinders the attribute formula engraved on the knife."

Alus stood up and pulled out the books on summoning magic from the bookshelves. They could use them to identify the magic formulas of all the summoning spells, picking out the ones that could be used.

"They're all formulaic. Is there something that we could use...?" asked Alus.

Alus had reacted much more than Loki had expected, and she tried to get his attention with soft "Uhms" and "Excuse mes" but to little effect, so she boldly hugged Alus's waist and stopped him from moving. It wasn't quite so modest, but it couldn't be helped. Once Alus was like that, there was nothing else she could do.

"Hmm?! What are you doing?" Surprised, Alus stopped flipping through the pages and looked at her with wide-open eyes.

Loki whispered a suggestion into his ear. "Sir Alus, how would Phoenix work?"

"That is my interpretation of the spell...! I see, they would be about as old. Not to mention that I played around with that magic formula quite a lot. All right."

Alus had perfect memories of the formulas for spells he had devised himself. Phoenix was a fire-attribute summoning spell, but when manifesting it could use the mana of other attributes, so it contained a unique magic formula.

If he'd put it in the Magic Compendium, Alus could probably receive glory and profits, but he'd chosen not to make the formula public. With the creator's name left blank, some people would inevitably get suspicious and try to investigate the creator, and since he wanted a peaceful life, he chose to pass on that.

Phoenix had also been engraved into one of the rings of his AWR, so a lot of key points had been abbreviated. But right now, that might instead be useful.

Nevertheless, it would no doubt take several days to create a smooth combination of Lost Spells. They needed to be positioned in a way that made them as effective as possible. The formula also couldn't get in the way of Fire Ikazuchi and would need to be condensed to a size that could be engraved on Loki's knife.

It would no doubt require an extraordinary number of attempts. To begin, Alus opened a virtual monitor, starting simulation software and inputting data into a virtual blueprint. Then something occurred to him. "Come to think of it, Loki, did you get this idea from seeing the magic formula hidden behind the grip on Tesfia's Kikuri?"

"The idea of engraving it on the AWR came from there. But I already thought that it would be difficult to construct the magic formula and manifest Fire Ikazuchi in the ordinary way. So I decided to try and break down the magic formula," she said.

Loki had only consulted with Alus because she felt that it would be impossible for a human to process such a large amount of complicated information all at once, so she had looked for a different approach.

She had abandoned the traditional way of thinking and looked over it with a flexible perspective, coming up with an approach that nobody had seen before. In a sense, it was the ultimate imagination and creation.

"That's correct. Currently, there are some ultimate-level spells that don't even have anyone that can use them. In other words, reproducing them is essentially equivalent to creating them from scratch. There are plenty of cases of spells that are strictly confidential and the magic formula is only demonstrated." As the software was in the process of going through tens of thousands of patterns, Alus began talking. "Are you planning on reproducing Fire Ikazuchi as a pure summoning spell?"

"No, I don't think the original spell was summoning magic. But I thought that it would need some parts from summoning magic," said Loki.

"I think you're on the right track. I honestly don't know who created the vertex magic formulas. The only thing that's clear is that they are from an old time. It's a famous collection of lightning attribute spells, but their development

and how they were handed down is wrapped in mystery,” said Alus.

As he thought about it, he realized they must have been from the height of magical research, when even taboo spells were being created. And because the spells were created during that chaotic period, much was left unclear. Later, when the spells started being treated as taboo, details were hidden, leaving only the spell names behind, stored in military or national databases.

But no matter how dangerous they might have been, such vast power couldn't be abandoned. It was proof that people were aware of reality and that an ideal world without weapons wasn't going to happen, especially not when nations were fighting each other and new threats such as Fiends could be born at any time. Not thinking about any of that, Alus and Loki exchanged technical terms as they worked through the challenges throughout the night.

There was an enormous amount of work to be done, including analyzing a vast number of patterns. It definitely could not be done in a day or two. After narrowing it down as much as possible, the verification process would begin. If they couldn't get any results from that, they would need to start from square one.

Normally, they could just expand the formulas on her AWR, but Loki's knives were very small so the space was finite. They would need to compress the formula to make it fit.

It was a high hurdle, but that only motivated Alus more. He'd overcome challenges like these time and time again in the past. He saw meaning in challenges that everyone else gave up on. Plus he just found it enjoyable.

But even the aforementioned work was only theoretical constructions. Certainty was necessary when creating a real AWR. Once a magic formula was drawn up, it was engraved on mana conductive materials used to make AWRs and put through testing to ensure the formula functioned properly and that there weren't any inadequacies or blockages in the flow of mana. If that failed, they would need to go back to the drawing board, having wasted a large amount of time.

That was why Alus had taken to calling them an exam. Because if it failed the exam, it would create a bottomless pit of despair. Sometimes it could take years

to seek out all of the problems.

Alus and Loki struggled through the night to improve the formula, and before they knew it, they had fallen asleep and didn't wake up until the evening of the following day. Loki reflected on the fulfilling night and found herself glad they were past exam period and that lectures were not going on now.

She hurriedly got to work on preparing food, but considering the time they had woken up, it was already time for dinner. It was after they'd eaten that the ringtone sounded, sending ripples through the room.

It frustrated Alus, but it was inescapable as long as he was inside. As the ringtone was so unique, it was clear who was calling. Picking up on Alus's bitter expression and his hesitation, Loki sipped her tea in silence. Meanwhile, the ringtone continued unceasingly.

If it had been someone impatient, they would have lost their temper from being ignored, but this person was very obnoxiously stubborn. It was a call from the head of the military—a person of paramount authority, a veteran who kicked back on a luxurious chair on the top floor of the military headquarters.

"Nobody's home," Alus bluntly said after a moment when the call went through.

"I see. So nobody's home? Then I will just have to come directly to you," the tired voice said in a tone too low to sound like a joke.

Alus had expected as much, since the Governor-General had gone out of his way to use a secret line. It was obvious that Berwick wasn't calling to have a fun chat. It would be so much easier for Alus if the old man was just calling to ramble.

"You seem to be in a bad mood, Governor-General. Don't you think you've been working too hard lately?" Alus asked in a polite tone.

Berwick had a habit of changing the inflection of his voice to make it easier for Alus to guess what he wanted to say. Of course, it would be troublesome to talk about serious topics with the same lighthearted enthusiasm as meeting up with an old friend.

"That sort of consideration is unusual for you," said Berwick. "To be honest, I

would love more appreciation but it doesn't come with the job."

"Then may I suggest that you give up your position to the next generation," Alus said, only partially joking. Berwick just sighed, and Alus ignored it. "Well, isn't there something you want to start off with? I was expecting this to be an apology for what happened," he continued forcefully.

It was clear that Berwick had been part of Cicelnia's plot, and it wasn't a topic that he could avoid. A heavy silence fell between the two.

"I hope you can understand the circumstances involved and...forgive me," Berwick's troubled voice said from the call.

That was enough to convince Alus that Berwick had been Cicelnia's accomplice and therefore a traitor in a sense. "So sending Lilisha to keep watch on me was all part of the plan, huh. You already knew everything about her and her family," Alus stated.

"I'd love to say that I would have told you from the start if that was the case, but I had my hands full. I did try to persist but I decided that there was no need to stop Lady Cicelnia's plot. It's vexing in many ways, Alus," said Berwick.

In the end, there was no escaping it for Alus. It was frustrating, but there was no doubt that Berwick had just barely avoided the worst outcome. The difference was in the extent of how well the people using him understood Alus. And in that sense, Berwick understood Alus better than Cicelnia.

"That's the kind of person Lady Cicelnia is. She is not particularly concerned if the outcome is good or bad. They are both part of the routes she expected. But to us, one of them was clearly inconvenient. So I made accommodations to prevent it, and in the end you made the decision," said Berwick.

What Berwick was saying without directly saying it was that if Lilisha had lost her life after going after Selva and Aferka had clashed with the Fable family, it would have brought about unavoidable mayhem. Berwick's words made it clear that he had known what Aferka was up to in advance. Berwick must have decided that letting Lilisha get killed, thus triggering a conflict between Fable and Womruina, would be a bad choice.

Incidentally, either way would have ended up with Aferka being crushed and

reorganized, so the only difference was the amount of blood spilled.

Cicelnia had even put herself on the bet, taking Aferka's Rayleigh going off the rails into account, and while that was fine for a gambler like Cicelnia, it was too risky for Berwick's tastes. It was impossible for others to get a measure of the gambler inside of Cicelnia.

Berwick had feared that if Alus got involved, there'd be chaos in the noble circuits and perhaps even Cicelnia would lose her life. That was why he'd sent Lilisha to the Institute and had her form a connection to Alus. And Alus had gone against his usual indifference and chosen to get involved. Like a billiards ball, it had affected all of the other pieces, leading to this chosen future.

"So were you behind Garb Sheep being mentioned in the Magic Compendium too?" Alus asked. That had been why Alus had visited the Fable family. Berwick must have been convinced that Alus would notice it.

Suddenly, a small laugh came from the other end. "So you bring up that. We'll just call it even for the magic formula for Fire Ikazuchi that you took out of the secret database."

"I thought it was only fair compensation for all of my cooperation," Alus lied, clicking his tongue in his mind. He hadn't thought that it would go unnoticed, but now that it had been brought up, he could only hold his tongue.

He wouldn't go so far as to say all's well that ends well, but it seemed that everything had worked out in the end. The only hassle had been what Alus felt was his wasted time and effort.

Even if he wasn't entirely satisfied, the current situation wasn't bad for him. Right now, Alus had control of the initiative. Even if the magic formula card had been offset, he still had Lilisha.

So if Alus made a point of expressing his displeasure and dissatisfaction, Berwick would need to explain himself. For better or worse, Alus had mastered the act of bargaining after going up against the battle-hardened Berwick, and right now he was enjoying having the upper hand for the first time in a long while. But there was one more thing he wanted to report and confirm with Berwick.

“By the way, do you know about the Tenbram?” Alus asked.

“Of course. It’s a little too slow to deepen connections to the Fable family, but it’s fine if you’re okay with it. I remember bringing up meeting with the daughter long ago...but I guess that ended before you enrolled into the Institute. I’m sorry, Loki, that was boorish of me.” Despite being an audio call, Berwick apologized to Loki, who’d been keeping her presence hidden.

Loki was momentarily taken aback by the old tale, but silently bowed at Berwick’s apology. However, Alus didn’t know why Berwick was apologizing to her. He also had no memories of any talks about Tesfia...or maybe it had been brought up too long ago for him to remember. He wondered if perhaps it had been Berwick trying to be considerate by matchmaking them.

Despite Alus remaining a blockhead, Loki looked to him for permission before answering Berwick’s apology. “Thank you for your consideration, Governor-General. Your keen insight is what allowed you to think about Sir Alus’s future. But the past is the past. It’s the present that is important,” Loki proudly asserted, not yielding one bit.

“You’re right,” Berwick said, laughing in response.

There was a harmonious atmosphere between Berwick and Loki, like they were a grandfather and granddaughter, but Alus was unfamiliar with relationships like that and was feeling left out.

As Alus dubiously raised an eyebrow, Berwick moved on to the real issue at hand. This abrupt and unforgiving approach was Berwick’s forte. It was an effective weapon that took advantage of a person’s openings, completely ignoring the mood.

Alus, who had firsthand experience with the approach, looked as disgusted as always, but it was an audio call so there was no way for Berwick to see it and said, “A border guard was attacked the other day. All media recordings were wiped out but we did receive a report of two suspicious individuals entering Alpha.”

There was the headache. And it was a big one.

“Is that a report from Lord Vizaist? Still, to receive direct orders from the

Governor-General in response is as awe-inspiring as always,” Alus said, his voice like a barb.

But Berwick continued without hesitation. “More specifically, there were signs of some sort of offensive spell being used, and there were casualties among the guards. I sent over a map and other data to you.”

Despite the annoyance he felt, Alus started up another virtual monitor and opened the data sent to him over the confidential line. It was a watchtower on the edge of the middle district with a nearby village in an otherwise unpopulated area. It was a remote area Alus had never been to.

“Am I supposed to chase after them? What about the conditions? I haven’t said that I’ll do it yet,” Alus said cryptically.

“Don’t be in such a hurry,” Berwick said and continued. “Of course they’re wanted, dead or alive. The security forces are not a match for them, and this time there are multiple targets.”

Strange.

Berwick had said that there were two assailants, but now there were “multiple.” Alus’s cheek twitched. He had a bad feeling about this.

“The Trojan Prison has fallen; it was a mass prison break. We’ve also learned that the ones who invaded from the Clevideet border were the prison’s warden and vice-warden,” explained Berwick.

That made it clear that the two were behind the prison break. The prison warden had betrayed the establishment by letting the prisoners out through the front door. But that would still put them in the middle of the Outer World.

Unlike Loki, Alus had heard of the prison’s existence. He didn’t know exactly how it worked, but he interpreted it as the final destination for violent magical criminals.

“The Trojan Prison was formerly a research facility,” said Berwick. “There was an overly talented researcher there, performing illegal human experiments that could never be done in the Inner World with the unspoken agreement of the seven nations. I’m sure you get what I mean when I say the ‘provisional punishment.’”

“So that’s what it is. In other words, the convicts were drained of mana, which was then supplied to the nations.” Alus couldn’t see Berwick, but he could imagine his face. It was surely incredibly displeased.

The provisional punishment was a heavily criticized punishment said to be more painful than the death penalty. After all, having mana drained by a device was a painful process they would only be freed of when their lives ended.

“Anyways, it was full of notorious magical criminals. I’m sure I sent a lot of them there myself,” said Alus.

“I suppose. However, we’ve learned that many of the escaped prisoners are hiding within Alpha,” responded Berwick.

Alus could only curse his bad luck. He could practically feel his strength leave his body. “Hiding? Since when?”

“We don’t know the details yet. But probably since around the time you returned from Vanalis,” said Berwick.

Alus let out a small sigh. “So just summon Lettie and have her help.”

“She has already left her post to investigate the area around the Trojan Prison. I recall her being quite annoyed at being given a delicate mission,” said Berwick. Being sent to Vanalis had been one thing, but heading over to territory controlled by another nation was more like a diplomatic mission, a poor match for someone with her personality. “Besides, we would need to accept collateral damage if we use her in Alpha.”

Hearing that, a deep wrinkle formed on Alus’s brow. Lettie specialized in explosive spells. She could control them to a degree, but if she had to hold herself back, it would only trip her up. And now they were up against escapees from the Trojan Prison. They would definitely bite back, and if she got impatient, she might end up blowing up an entire town.

Alus considered other skilled Magicmasters. “How about Sajik and Mujir?”

“After returning from investigating the Trojan Prison, they will be concentrating on protecting the capital. We also need to station Magicmasters in Vanalis.” Berwick’s argument was so sound that there was no room for rebuttals.

It was for this very reason Aferka existed, but they were currently the ruler's personal guard. Not only was the chain of command different, but there was no guarantee that Cicelnia wouldn't do something unnecessary. If there were vicious criminals hiding in Alpha, Alus would need to go. It was true that there was nobody else who could go.

"Governor-General, is this why Cicelnia hurried to reorganize Aferka?" Alus asked in a stiff tone.

To which Berwick answered, a little daunted, "I don't know either... It is possible."

Cicelnia had Alpha's Eye working directly under her. And as a ruler, she was privy to information that Alus or Berwick didn't have, so this could be the reason Cicelnia had been in such a rush. The timing was just too good to be true.

"So has Aferka already identified the escaped prisoners' movements?" Alus asked.

Alus would have liked a mention of it during Lilisha's inauguration ceremony, but perhaps they hadn't found anything tangible. Or maybe...

Did she go ahead to earn a track record? Alus wondered.

It was exactly the kind of thing that Cicelnia would think of, but there was no way of confirming anything. Lilisha had taken a few days off from the Institute.

"Who knows. And Aferka is not under my jurisdiction. I don't know how far ahead Lady Cicelnia has seen either. But she will be moving for Alpha's sake, so she won't get in our way," said Berwick.

"I'm amazed you can say that when we're already surrounded by trouble," Alus said. He didn't want to think very much about Cicelnia. The way she thought of everything as a game was extremely tiring. "If I can refuse, I'd love to pass...but I guess that's not possible. I would at least appreciate it if you can reduce the burden somewhat." Alus could only hope.

"Oh! So you'll do it!" exclaimed Berwick.

Talk about shameless, Alus thought as he glared at the black call screen. He

imagined the Governor-General happily bringing his hands together on the other end of the call.

“I’ve sent the prisoner registry to you. Take a look at it. Vizaist seems to be struggling with it too. There are also notes for some of the escaped prisoners that we have been able to verify. And while top secret, news of the incident has already reached the ears of other nations’ top brass. Of course, they won’t meddle needlessly.”

Alus decided to disregard his frustration that Berwick hadn’t just sent this info with the map data. He carelessly opened the list, which contained the names and numbers of the prisoners as well as a record of their crimes before being captured. As he ran his eyes through the list, he came to a realization. His body stiffened for a moment.

Loki noticed that and impatiently asked, “Sir Alus?”

Alus’s stare was fixed on one name in the list. After a while, he spoke up in a low, growling tone. “Governor-General, I killed this woman. So why is she on this list?”

His chilling tone made even Loki’s body freeze. The rising tension could even be felt from the other side of the call.

There was a moment of silence before Berwick spoke in a restrained tone, conveying facts in a blunt way. “Nox, is it? It just means that she hadn’t died at that point. You should know that better than anyone.”

While he wanted to blame Berwick, Alus felt like he held part of the responsibility. Nox was a female executive of Kurama, and her work in the shadows had proven very troublesome for both Alus and Vizaist.

After their encounter with Nox, Alus had proposed they wipe out Kurama, but the top brass had rejected it. Even though they didn’t have the strength needed to pull it off, the top brass were being very heavy-handed at the time, and not even Berwick could persuade them. So Alus had taken down Nox behind the scenes, but he’d failed to finish the job.

“So it’s my fault.”

Nox had gained notoriety in the underworld as the mass murderer of the

century. It had taken a great deal of money and effort for the military to conceal that fact, and they were forced to focus on information control.

If she's still alive and uses that thing against a city, there'll be hundreds or even thousands of dead, he thought, his expression stiff.

Berwick spoke as if to calm him down. "Don't worry. It's not a problem. I forgot to tell you, but that's a list of everyone who has been confined in the Trojan Prison. While the majority have escaped, there are some exceptions. On the way to the prison, Lettie confirmed that Nox is dead. The body was quite decomposed, but the cell record and number indicate that it's Nox. Look at the black check mark next to the name."

Alus looked at the list again, and did indeed see a black check mark next to several names in the list. That meant that they weren't counted as targets because they were either still imprisoned or dead, like Nox.

"Incidentally, we don't know her cause of death. Just know that you're not the only one dissatisfied with this. There are a lot of mysteries with this incident. There aren't even many signs of conflict in the Trojan Prison," said Berwick.

"I bet. If the warden and vice-warden were working with them, then I doubt there was even time for chaos to erupt," said Alus.

"Yeah. They also found the bodies of that researcher and several guards, all with their heads crushed. Maniacs with a penchant for human experiments or not, their contribution to humanity is a certainty."

After Berwick finished his report, there was a silence as he waited for Alus's response. Berwick had found out what happened at the Trojan Prison faster than any other nation thanks to Vizaist's work, but he was forced to take extrajudicial measures because of international laws. Lettie's investigation was likely also done in secret.

Still, it was turning into a huge deal. Berwick continued waiting for some sort of reaction, but Alus only gave him a fed up "And?"

"I'm also forming another squad," said Berwick. "They're not as experienced in battles against people as you are, but complaining will get me nowhere. I

want you to take care of the most dangerous of the escapees.”

“I understand. I don’t know what they’re planning, but who knows where the fireworks might go off as long as they’re in Alpha,” Alus said, reluctantly nodding. “It’d be too much of a pain being dragged all over the place if that were to happen. I at least want to get this done soon so I can get a good night’s sleep.”

“Should I attach some people to you?” Berwick asked, but there was no guarantee that Magicmasters in the Outer World were as useful inside. Many were reluctant to use magic on another human being; otherwise, Aferka would never have been necessary. Meanwhile, the internal security forces lacked strength, and these were serious magical criminals.

Alus considered that and gave an immediate reply. “No, that won’t be necessary. But...Governor-General, did you time this for just after the exam period?”

“Unfortunately, no, I only wish I had that much leeway. It is a major incident within the nation. You understand what that means don’t you?” asked Berwick.

Alus’s answer was silence.

If information leaked, the nobles would become unhappy with the current government and actively get involved. Then they would point their criticism at Berwick, using it as the perfect chance to show the populace their worth. And Berwick had plenty of political opponents, making this a dangerous spot for him. In hindsight, Cicelnia’s hard-line stance of reorganizing Aferka could pay off by driving a wedge between those nobles.

Berwick was also waiting for a follow-up report from Vizaist. Meanwhile, Alus resented still being in the military. He cursed the duty of a soldier that bound him. He was also tired of this kind of exchange.

“So about the reward this time...” Alus began. Alus frankly wasn’t interested in a monetary reward. He already had more than he could use, and he didn’t see any reason in adding more to that pile. That was why he’d requested things other than money that caught his interest. But this time... “I don’t need it. If I were to say, it’d be credits...but I guess that doesn’t matter at this stage. At any rate, there’s nothing I want anymore,” he said.

Berwick tensed a little. “Hmm...are you sure? You could ask for anything, even if it’s a little hard to get a hold of or requires a bit of man power.” The old books that Alus had asked of Berwick before had been difficult to find, so he had likely used military manpower for it. “I can grant you anything but time.”

Alus showed no interest in even that offer. True, he wanted time—he could get a hold of anything else as long as he had time. In that sense, there were still quite a few things that caught Alus’s interest, but he did not intend to ask anyone else for them.

At this rate, they would be stuck arguing back and forth.

“Then let’s discuss this again once this is over,” said Alus.

“Hmm, very well. The Governor-General usually has a lot of authority, but your requests are so specific that it’s difficult to use it effectively.” Berwick’s excuses came through the speaker rather quickly. In reality, Berwick could grant pretty much anyone’s wishes aside from Alus’s, but it no longer mattered to Alus. Suddenly Berwick spoke up in a serious tone. “That aside, Alus, try to conceal your identity as much as possible for this mission. Do you have any disguise you can use?”

Alus gave the monitor a dubious look. “Why? Surely it’s too late for that.”

“The targets are vicious escapees from a secret prison,” said Berwick. “It is possible that they would need to be eliminated without leaving behind a shred of evidence.”

“You mean not to leave a single trace behind?” asked Alus.

“Yes. Even now, they remain in hiding without giving us any leads. I believe they have a formidable intelligence network and people working with them. If there are too many rat holes, just destroying one won’t be enough to shut down their network.”

“So it would be bad if I were to fail to take one of them down after they see my face?”

“Something like that,” said Berwick. “Lady Cicelnia and I will be enough to cover for you on the surface, but it’d be a problem if your face is leaked into the underworld.”

Alus was certainly capable of doing behind-the-scenes work, even assassinations, but that wasn't widely known. They couldn't allow for a Single's prestige to be diminished. Mistrust of the military was directly connected to distrust of its Magicmasters. And distrust of Magicmasters meant distrusting magic itself, which would lead to accusations and hostility towards those in power.

"There's been an annoying insistence on how bloodied Aferka has been reborn as a clean royal guard. Just like how Rusalca's Jean Rumbulls's looks and soft demeanor is playing a role in the nation's image. In other words, it's a change of diplomatic strategy," said Berwick. He then turned to his own nation. "As for Lettie, she doesn't know how to act."

She was liable to punch anyone who complained to her.

"Lettie is still not... Let's leave it at that. But it's not like Magicmasters are meant to be some sort of celebrities," said Alus.

"I know. It's not like I'll demand that you sit down at a fan gathering for an autograph session. Besides, having a different face for acting incognito can be pretty convenient. For example...you could go to the theater or dinner with your sweetheart," said Berwick.

"I don't have anyone like that."

"Oh, I wonder. Ah ha ha." Berwick evaded the topic with a deliberate laugh, but Alus just sighed and looked sour.

"Well, if we're talking about a disguise, I suppose I do have one," he answered, glancing at the corner of the room with a grimace.

"Then use it. And we'll handle the details as usual. Work together with Vizaist," said Berwick.

"Understood," Alus said and reached out to end the call when Berwick let a few words slip like a parting gift.

"This time we have unofficial cooperators from Clevideet. I don't believe you'll meet, but just in case."

"Understood," he said again and ended the call before Berwick could say

anything unnecessary. He didn't know who these cooperators were, but it didn't matter as long as they didn't hold him back, so he didn't have any further interest in them.

While Alus slouched in his chair, Loki stood up with her back straight. He pointed to his own room, and Loki nodded in return. He wasn't sure if he should be happy or sad that this alone was enough to convey his intentions, especially this time.

Loki happily disappeared into his bedroom and came out with a black suitcase. Seeing Alus nod, she opened it up with a bright smile, but to Alus it was a depressing sight.

"This is what you wore at the Magical Martial Arts Demonstration in the Seven Nations Friendship Magical Tournament, isn't it, contestant Ulhava?" asked Loki.

"Don't say contestant," said Alus.

"But I think it's cool," said Loki.

It was a black outfit with a mask that had been bestowed upon him by Cicelnia. It was a convenient disguise, but Alus didn't find it aesthetically pleasing in any way. But based on how excited Loki was, he realized that apparently he was the only one who felt that way, so maybe he should be questioning himself.



Eighty-Second Chapter

March of the Mad King

The silver moon shone in the midnight sky with twinkling stars above. Even though it was a tranquil night, all the lights were on in the mansion and it bustled with activity.

Nobility tended to build villas in remote areas with great views in all nations. At present, the temperature and even the starry sky was artificial in the human domain, but the upper class still enjoyed summer retreats in idyllic countrysides. However, this mansion was strangely isolated from the surrounding scenery compared to villas used by nobles, as if eerily lurking in the darkness of the remote region.

The mansion's tidy, refined garage had several parking spaces, and only a single luxury magic car parked there. The spacious hall on the second floor of the mansion was normally used for balls, because its lavish decorations would create a glamorous atmosphere. However, there was no sign of people there, and the air was cold and deserted. But empty as it was, the hall now had several leather sofas placed in its center, arranged in a circle.

Suddenly, the air in the hall wavered. A door along the wall opened without sound, and wind blew in. Following the cold air was a person who walked without making a sound. And as if that was a signal to start, one after another, people entered from doors on all sides of the hall.

"A decent gathering. It's about time," a voice said to no one in particular after a few minutes passed. The figures reacted to the voice, wriggling with a hint of delight. However, the first to speak didn't say anything else, like a stern ruler who would not permit the audience to reveal their honest feelings.

Finally, the voice he seemed to have been waiting for echoed heavily in the hall. "Dante, I've finished things on my end."

A giant of a man ducked under the doorframe with another man behind him

—Gordon and Suzar. Gordon wore a large piece of cloth like a cloak, covering an odd ridge running across his back. Suzar stood by Gordon's side like his aide, acting unnaturally calm despite the overly tense situation.

"Like I said before, I'll be working with you, Dante," said Gordon.

"I have no objections either," said Suzar.

Dante grinned at the two and urged them to take a seat on a free sofa chair. But the ridge on Gordon's back got in the way, destroying the chair as he sat down on what was left. That was when an intense perfume wafted through the air.

Stepping forward, accompanied by a young lady-killer waiting on her, was Mir Ostayka. In her hand was a vividly colored iron fan.

"Dante, like you said, it seems that somebody has noticed me. I've disposed of several that were tailing me, but it was impossible to get all of them. There seemed to have been some very experienced people mixed in. They were a pain to deal with, so I just shook them off," she said.

She seemed to have borrowed a revealing outfit that emphasized her breasts. Her manicured fingers shook strangely, and she let out a sweet breath as if intoxicated by herself. Without asking, she walked to a chair and sat down, crossing her long legs.

"That's enough. It's a good thing they were so dim-witted," said Dante.

"Maybe I should have trapped and caught a few? I could have made them confess their background and killed the people behind them." Mir shrugged.

But Suzar bluntly answered, "It'd be pointless; once you get to the pros it wouldn't lead anywhere. Not even you could do it."

"Oh, look at you talking," said Mir. "Hmm, I see that you've gotten your own AWR. But are you serious about helping us? I wouldn't trust a dog like you further than I could throw him."

Suzar's cold eyes sharpened beneath his cap at Mir's provocation. "It seems this convict has forgotten how to speak as soon as she was freed from her cage."

Mir replied with a dubious smile. “Oh, I was only joking. Welcome, and congratulations on becoming one of us, Vice-Warden Suzar. I expect both you and Warden Gordon to work like dogs,” Mir said and spread her iron fan, concealing her scornful smile like a noblewoman.

Instead of relaxing the mood, Mir’s joke made the air around Suzar fill with mana pressing down on its surroundings. The vicious magical criminals trembled with fear, and leaned back as if trying to get away from him. Some even pulled back their chairs and braced themselves as the air in the hall froze over.

Then Gordon said, “Suzar,” and that was enough to erase Suzar’s storm of killing intent.

“Oh my,” Mir let slip, as if to show she was let down. “You have a lot of patience for somebody who stoically abstains from women. But if I find the time, I wouldn’t mind playing with you.” Mir giggled as if dealing with a child, licking her lips, as if trying to catch him off his guard.

Suzar had lost all interest, silently correcting his posture.

“My, you’re unexpectedly stuffy. Ha ha, is this one the same I wonder?” Mir crossed her legs, showing off sexy legs that had been hidden by her skirt.

Seeing that, Gordon spoke up with a frown. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but you’re the leader here, Dante. I’m merely the former warden...but I’m not going to become a babysitter.”

“I don’t need that. If you wanna go at it, then by all means. Just don’t get in my way,” said Dante.

Dante’s few words seemed to consider Gordon’s feelings and made everyone curl themselves up, frozen by a mysterious fear. Everyone could feel their hearts beating faster.

“Oh, Dante, please, and here I am helping you this much,” Mir said in a nasal voice, looking ecstatically pleased.

“I’m serious. I don’t care when or where you want to kill each other. I know you’re all craving blood. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to have a bloody fight to evaluate each other,” answered Dante.

“How cold. It would be sad to say bye-bye after coming this far,” said Mir.

Dante ignored her and turned his attention to Gordon. “Well, let’s talk about your side job. Tell me the tales of your travels, Gordon.”

“It’s a boring one. I ran rampant for a while as a replacement for my letter of resignation,” said Gordon. “I came across Clevideet’s Single while I was at it, and she was just a little brat. If someone like that can sit on that seat, then I have no interest in it.”

Gordon and Suzar had had an easy victory against a Single. That meant one of Gordon’s goals had disappeared.

Gordon had once been within reach of becoming a Single Digit Magicmaster, but he’d essentially been demoted and made warden for the Trojan Prison. Unfortunately for Gordon, the prison needed the person in charge to be someone of adequate ability with a commanding presence who could keep the vicious magical criminals under control. He was sent as a result of a political power game.

The nation he had been so loyal to instead gave their one Single seat to some little girl, entrusting the dream of national prosperity to her. Everyone in the top brass had known that Gordon was obsessed with the position and prestige of a Single Digit Magicmaster. They also saw his overwhelming power as a problem.

They knew if he were to get the position, nobody would be able to stop him should he abuse his authority...so in a sense he was considered a nuisance.

When Gordon had learned how the top brass had let their cowardice cloud their judgment, he blew his top. He already had connections in Kurama at the time as a necessary part of the job. He hadn’t used them for his own gain yet.

But that day, Gordon changed. His loyalty to his nation vanished, and his anger smoldered under the surface, inside of a cage in the Outer World. In the Trojan Prison, even the jailers were isolated prisoners.

Aware or not of what that giant of a man was feeling, Dante let out a low, ridiculing laugh. “Ha ha ha, what the hell’s that? So did you finish off that little girl?”

“No, I didn’t kill her there. Well, if we cross paths again, I’ll make sure to kill her. But still, I never imagined that the current Single would be so weak.” With a hint of disappointment on his face, Gordon dismissed the prestigious title he had desired in the past without any regrets. He had hoped to see someone more worthy sitting in the seat he had so sought after in the past.

“You can do whatever you like,” said Dante. “But I’ll need you two to go on a rampage again anyways. So be as flashy as you can until you grow tired of it.”

Gordon answered Dante with a bitter look. “Hmph, don’t measure us by your scummy standards. We aren’t bloodthirsty killers. And torturing the weak is not my hobby.”

“I can’t believe my ears after all of those shitty experiments that crazy professor performed that you tolerated. That woman was broken, but you’re no exception. I could never get a good night’s sleep whenever she strolled down the hallways because of all of the screams. It was really bad for my skin you know.” Mir’s complaint was surprisingly sound, but considering what the provisional punishment had been, that she handled it as a minor complaint showed her own abnormality.

“The prisoners from the fourth and fifth layers truly are monsters,” Gordon said, somewhat exasperated. If not for that, he never would have helped in a prison break in the Outer World. Since there was no point rambling any longer, Gordon cut to the chase. “We’ve already been made targets by the nations. Trying to rely on petty tricks will just get us crushed by the resources they have available.”

Gordon had heard that their cooperators were people of noble lineage with discontent towards the current government, and aside from providing a hideout and the bare minimum of resources, they wouldn’t get involved. Only a single person had served as their contact, and a very simple one at that, which saved Dante the trouble of having to dispose of them.

Mekfis had mentioned wanting some of Dante’s forces in return, but the selection of a contact person had been quite sloppy for that. The prisoners had converted him into a corpse when he put on an air of nobility and claimed to be a watchdog to ensure the promise was carried out.

There'd been no contact after that.

Mekfis seemed unwilling to play any role other than that of a mediator. It was wise for the head of a family acting behind the scenes not to show their face directly. If the hiding escaped prisoners were found, it was the noble who would be in trouble.

"Hmph, so we will be crushed by the various nations, is it...? But that's a needless worry. After coming to Alpha, it's clear that the sheep here are stuck in a dream," Dante said, eyes narrowed in amusement.

"The citizens here don't know of the bleak reality in the Outer World, nor of the taste of violence and blood. They are living in an illusory garden, all carefree and refined. Only their information control is competent enough. So the military will avoid making any overt movements or launching any large-scale operations. Not that they have the decisiveness or spirit to do so anyways," said Dante.

Suzar's stare remained fixed on Dante as he spoke in a hushed tone. "Kurama. Them going strong is proof of how weak the military is."

"That's right. Kurama still hiding within the seven nations is the biggest proof of all. Despite knowing that they're a dangerous element, no military has the courage to get off their asses and launch an all-out war."

"Say, Dante, I'm tired of all this bothersome talk," said Mir. "Can't you tell me about that Mekfis? It doesn't sound like he's on our side, but he assisted in our breakout and introduced us to that noble, didn't he? But, good guy or not, he doesn't really excite me."

They had all witnessed Mekfis slaughtering escaped prisoners to keep the numbers thin. So not even Mir, who prioritized a nice face over all else, had taken a liking to him. If anything, she'd picked up on his true nature. Frankly, she was reluctant to even call him human. And while it was only a hunch, she trusted her intuition as it had helped her survive countless battles.

"Mekfis, huh. He's an old guard of Kurama. Apparently even he's forgotten what his real face looks like," Dante said.

"What's that supposed to mean? Is he going through puberty?" Mir spat out.

Dante continued with a serious expression. “No, it’s just what it sounds like. He has a special ability related to blood, and he’s always lying about his appearance. Just try not to pick a fight with him, or you’ll regret it. We might end up disposing of him in the end, but don’t make a move for now.”

Mir sank into silence so Gordon interjected, “I don’t know all of the details, but he’s too whimsical. I think it would be better to get rid of him sooner rather than later.”

Gordon had some connections with Kurama, and as far as he knew, Mekfis tended to stay in the shadows, even more so than the usual Kurama members. He’d never heard of him accepting any shady jobs brought in from the outside. He only appeared for negotiations and collecting debts even though he himself had no interest in money and often busied himself with personal activities that didn’t benefit Kurama.

“It’s hard to get a grip on him, but it’s at least clear that he’s not as militant as Hazan. I can’t imagine losing a fight against him,” said Gordon.

“Don’t be in such a rush. There’s a difference in strength from what I can see. Their executives are all equal to Singles or above them. Ah, but you just mocked one of those just before,” said Dante.

“Indeed...but if you’re going to go that far, I’ll avoid picking any unnecessary fights for now,” said Gordon.

“A wise choice. Mekfis is suspicious, even to me. In the worst case he might even...no, that’s enough for now.” Dante’s grin grew wider, but didn’t say any more.

That seemed to bother Gordon, who furrowed his brow. “Hmm...what even is the reason for Mekfis lending a hand? What’s he after?”

Everyone waited silently for Dante to speak. As attention turned his way, he put his arms on his armrest and slowly clasped his hands together over his stomach. His thumbs pressed against each other, and he slowly closed his eyes because to him the air felt as heavy as lead.

Recalling his conversation with Mekfis after thinning out the number of escaped prisoners, he deliberately gave his own conjecture. “He was

relentlessly concerned about that woman...Nox. And this Nox woman was a former member of Kurama.”

It seemed Gordon found the answer anticlimactic and let out a sigh. As the warden, Gordon knew everything about the Trojan Prison.

“Is that it?” he asked. “Don’t tell me that it was some sort of display of friendship. Besides, Nox died several months ago. Her luck ran out when that crazed professor, Kwinska, designated her as a test subject.”

It was difficult for Mir to follow Gordon. After all, there was a thick bulkhead separating the fourth and fifth layers. Mir had only learned of Dante’s intention through Gordon.

Seeing Mir’s perplexed expression, Gordon spoke up again to explain. “Nox was a woman confined in the fifth layer. Have you heard about the mass suicide incident? The Vivid Bloodletting Incident?”

As Mir was a homicidal maniac, he didn’t even need to ask. No matter how much the information was controlled, the event was well known in the underworld. The name of the incident had come from Nox’s own mouth.

“Ah yes, that thing,” said Mir. “I wish I could have seen it with my own eyes. What a masterpiece it was. Everyone gathered there killed themselves using the fastest means possible... So Nox was the mastermind behind that?”

“Probably.” It had happened in another nation that he wasn’t connected to, so Gordon could only give a weak affirmation.

Dante joined in on the conversation. “Mekfis reacted ever so slightly to Nox’s death. It was like he’d been outmaneuvered, and he even looked a little frustrated.”

“So he was looking to free Nox?”

That was how Gordon understood it, but Dante didn’t seem to agree.

“No, if that was why he helped with the breakout, it was way too late. Nox falling prey to the professor was bad luck, but I think Mekfis was trying to make contact with her regardless. He might have wanted to kill her.”

“So it was to silence her or over a personal grudge?” Gordon asked. To him it

felt like nonsense. Even if Nox hadn't become professor Kwinska's guinea pig, she would have eventually lost her life anyways. Her body had been a wreck when she was thrown into her cell, and the brutal provisional punishment was then carried out on top of that. It was hard to believe that she'd last for long.

"Speaking of, your cell was next to hers. Did she tell you anything, Dante? Like a reason for why Mekfis would go after her?" asked Gordon.

"Who knows," said Dante. "That woman had completely lost it. She'd mutter to herself whenever she could."

Dante shrugged, but an eerie smile appeared on his face as he seemed to remember something; it seemed almost as innocent as a child's.

"Anyways, if we stand out too much, we will end up clashing with Kurama. But we're still lacking in many ways to go at it with them. So perhaps we should send a simple present to deceive them," he said with a fearless smile.

"Let's stir things up a little in Alpha. Not only would Kurama owe us, but it's also a request from Mekfis, who sent us to Alpha in the first place. Apparently, he doesn't mind if we go on a massacre and cause a rain of blood. Well, I'm sure it's a request from not just Mekfis but also from that noble. There was also a request to cut down one of Alpha's Singles. That's probably the real objective. Kurama would benefit from having less opposition. Single Digit Magicmasters don't appear all that often after all," Dante muttered absentmindedly. "So making a scene will be like killing two, three, or even four birds with one stone."

"How far are you going to take this? They might not move their armies right away, but there's a limit to their patience," Gordon eventually said with a dismayed look.

Dante suddenly raised his head. And what he said next was completely unexpected to everyone in the room. Even Gordon rose up from his chair a little.

"How far? Well to the end of the world. I'm aiming for the New World. I will be leaving this cramped cradle of humanity, the Outer World, and even the Outer Sea, far behind."

Everything seemed to freeze for a moment. They all turned pale and were at a loss for words. Nobody in the seven nations had done so, or even considered it. The seven nations had only really expanded the areas they controlled by around a hundred kilometers from their frontline bases.

After a moment's pause, voices rang out.

"Th-That's too reckless!"

"We have no intention of risking our lives for that!"

The commotion died down after a few seconds of Dante staring at each and every one of them.

"Well, well, I am stunned... Do you even have any leads?" Gordon asked, recovering quickly.

"True, it's reckless, but it's also realistic. But the bigger the plans, the more detailed it needs to be," said Suzar.

The other escaped prisoners all looked nervous as they waited for Dante's answer.

"If I didn't, I wouldn't bring it up. No, I guess I would have. Hey, you guys. I'll ask you again. What road lies ahead of us?" Dante asked clearly, in the most serious tone yet.

He kicked back in his leather chair, narrowing his eyes as if looking down on the surrounding criminals. "Sure, we can rise up in the world and fight Kurama. And as long as we prepare ourselves, we could even go up against a nation. If we put up a good fight, we could create lakes of blood and mountains of corpses. But that's it."

"Hmph, I get it. None of us have a place to return to," Gordon said, summing it up.

Mekfis has already cleared them of the empty-headed and weak. Those who couldn't resist their urge to kill and deviated from Dante's control would be mercilessly buried in the future.

If they even had the reason to live a normal life, they never would have been in the secret prison in the first place. It was impossible to deny that they were

fundamentally broken. There would never be a place for them in the seven nations. And it wasn't like their noble patron would hide them forever. And even if they joined Kurama, they'd likely just be used and discarded.

Seeing no objections, Dante let a chilling mana flow from him. In no time at all, an ominous magic smoke filled the hall.

Dante held his arms wide open and proudly declared, "Let us start with a light war. You've been trapped in the depths of darkness for years, so why not go a little crazy."

Then he said with a devilish grin, "For the sake of our ambition, we'll first get our hands on *that*."

"What's *that*? It's related to the information I looked into, isn't it?" Mir asked with a smile on her face.

She stood up and approached Dante bewitchingly.

"Yeah, combined with information from a different channel, I know where it's hidden. As long as we can get our hands on it, it doesn't matter how many die in the process. Knowing what it is, the nation will probably send out a Single or two, but we can just dispose of them in the process," said Dante.

"Oh stop being such a tease and tell us already... What are we taking?" Mir asked in a sweet voice, leaning on Dante and pressing her breasts against his arm. The pink blush on her captivating white skin showed her excitement.

That excitement spread to everyone in the hall, giving these vicious beasts goose bumps as they obeyed their inner desires.

And so preparations were complete. Once out of the mansion, the escaped prisoners would be free. No law would be able to bind their lust for blood. Kicking reason and morals to the curb, survival of the fittest would sweep across the nation.

Dante led the way and opened the grand door leading outside, narrowing his eyes beneath the silver light of the false moon and spoke.

"We're going to steal Minerva."

Eighty-Third Chapter

Unwelcome Pick-up and Drop-off

It was the day after Berwick's call, which had left a bad taste in Alus's mouth. Even though it was an urgent matter, there was no word from Vizaist. Alus knew from past experience that he'd be contacted in a few hours at most.

And since when dealing with the escaped convicts hiding in the nation, the faster the better, Alus knew that the silence meant even Vizaist couldn't find out where they were hiding.

The more he thought about it, the more bitterness welled up within him. Just what kind of twisted fate was responsible for the mission of eliminating the worst of the worst escaped convicts falling to him, a Single Digit Magicmaster?

But with no message regarding the details coming his way, nothing could come from fretting about it. Wanting to use his time effectively, Alus decided to improve the Fire Ikazuchi's magic formula. But as he was running through the vast notes on magic formulas, his eyes opened wide and he got up from his chair.

"Loki, get ready." Alus was abrupt, but Loki didn't miss a beat.

Her preparations were already finished. Loki and Alus had already memorized the list of names of prisoners, as well as erasing all of the top secret material. Alus had even donned his disguise, with only the mask left to put on. But for some reason, Alus took just his AWR and moved over to the window.

"You standby for a while," he said.

Loki's eyes opened wide in confused surprise. Alus had promised to always allow Loki to accompany him on his missions unless some circumstances didn't permit it.

"I'm not trying to leave you behind. I just want you to see me off for a moment," he explained.

Loki narrowed her eyes at the meaningful reply and joined Alus to look out the window. She saw a luxury magic car coming to a stop beneath the laboratory. It was the kind of car used to escort dignitaries, something rare at the academy. It was armored enough to withstand any impact and had doors more than twenty centimeters thick. The magic car was also fully equipped with all kinds of functions.

Eventually a group of four men and women in suits and sunglasses stepped out. They were well groomed and their clothes free of wrinkles, the very picture of professional bodyguards, with no openings in their movements.

They're carrying concealed AWRs, thought Alus.

Even from Alus's point of view, they were first-rate bodyguards, but he narrowed his eyes further.

"That's quite the VIP treatment, even if it happened to be the Governor-General. Talk about a waste of taxpayer money," he said.

"I think that's how it's supposed to be," said Loki.

As Alus and Loki spoke, the group of four moved. Three of them lined up in front of the door, while the last entered the building. From the looks of it, they weren't the Governor-General's bodyguards escorting him here to see Alus but guards sent to fetch Alus himself.

One of the three by the car looked up at the window on the top floor, where Alus was. He could see their emotionless eyes through the light-colored sunglasses. He didn't know if they were soldiers or not, but he could sense a quiet and strong will, faithful to their duty.

"What might they be here for?" asked Loki.

"Who knows. It's probably some of Berwick's unwanted attention," said Alus.

"You jest," Loki said lightheartedly.

Before long, the intercom rang.

Alus wasn't some nobleman, and he wasn't a fan of anything too extravagant. So just having someone so gloomy and stiff coming to his place was uninteresting to him. Looking at the monitor, Alus saw a tall, slightly skinny man

on the other side of the screen. For just a moment, he removed his sunglasses and gave a light bow.

“We have come to get you,” he said politely.

With a sigh, Alus turned his head and opened the door, his AWR still hanging by his waist. “Good work. Then let’s go.”

After giving Loki a quick look, he left her behind and walked off with the man. The man’s leather shoes clacked as he walked down the stairs. His steps were strangely orderly, and in spite of his height, they were surprisingly soft and light.

“This kind of thing must be demanding for you too. Is this by the Governor-General’s instructions? Or Lord Vizaist’s kindness?” Alus casually began.

The man glanced over, smiled, and said after a moment, “It is the Governor-General’s consideration. Naturally, we will take the utmost precautions and guarantee a safe journey.”

“Well, thanks.”

Since it was still morning, they didn’t pass anyone on their way. Once they reached the entrance, the remaining three lowered their heads at the same time in a smooth and flowing motion.

The back of the car was spacious, with seats facing each other. Considering the extravagant leather seats and the heavy impact-resistance armor, chartering a car like this must have been an expensive venture.

As soon as he was ushered into the car, a man and a woman sat down on either side of Alus, with the man who’d guided him sitting on the opposite side. The last person to get in was a woman with long hair, who sat down at the driver’s seat after putting on white gloves.

Alus removed the AWR from his waist and placed it next to him before leaning back against the seat. As he put his weight against it, he could feel the softness of the specially made cushion against his back.

With that, the car drove off. In no time at all, they were out of the Institute and headed in a straight course where the Tower of Babel rose in the distance. The magic car gradually picked up speed as the Institute and surrounding city

were left behind.

Thanks to the establishment of Circle Ports, there were few people on the road. Suddenly, the woman driving the car reached out to manipulate a virtual screen with one of her hands. With an affirmative beep that indicated that something had completed, the screen disappeared. At the same time, the interior became dimmer. The morning light slipped in from the tops of the obscured windows. Shadows cast by the trees flickered inside of the car as they sped by them.

“By the way, what’s the destination? The military headquarters?” asked Alus.

“We have only been told to bring you to the designated point,” the man in front of Alus answered with a fake smile pasted on his emotionless face.

Suddenly, the mana engine let out a scream as the car suddenly braked. The man’s smile disappeared. In contrast, Alus looked at the man with a relaxed, albeit slightly exasperated manner.

“We’re almost at the outskirts of the city. Couldn’t you be a little more patient?” Alus asked, and there was a flash of silver on either side of him.

The man and woman on either side of him swung their arms in a semicircle and fired a knife towards his face. Alus grabbed both by the wrist and twisted his hands. While racked with pain from their twisted wrists, the two would-be assassins floated up.

Still, they were within a car. They propped themselves up by thrusting their free hands at the roof and added force to try to push their knives further in.

Sensing that, Alus quickly spun, dodging the man on the left’s knife, and snapping the wrist of the short-haired woman on the right. She dropped her knife, and the man stabbed the headrest. In that opening, Alus pulled on the woman’s arm. Using the momentum, he shifted his center of gravity and slipped out of the situation.

Alus bent his right index finger, and Night Mist wildly jumped up. It spun in the air, and once it leaped out of its sheath, the black blade mercilessly pierced the back of the young man who’d attacked him. Blood splattered, dyeing the roof red. Meanwhile, the man seated opposite Alus pulled out an AWR and

thrust it at him.

Suddenly, a long needle shot out from its tip. Alus sensed the surprise attack, and kicked the man's arm up. Just then, Night Mist brought the body of the young man, which it was still stabbed through, over to Alus like a well-trained hunting dog. Grabbing him by the collar, Alus threw him at the man as a makeshift wall, blocking any follow-up attacks.

Alus glanced over at the rear-view mirror, meeting the eyes of the driver. From the movements of her eyes, and how she was holding the gas pedal down, Alus could see what was going on. The needle attack of the man who'd had his arm kicked up was just a decoy, as he'd already finished preparing his spell.

Alus clicked his tongue in his mind and curled up. He felt a presence from the sky...

A huge stake-shaped rock suddenly pierced the ground in front of the magic car, causing a high-speed crash. The rock stake dug into the front of the car, and the powerful impact shook the car.

Even through all that, Alus remained vigilant of his enemies. While supporting his body through the chaos, he predicted what his opponents would do next.

The impact with the rock stake lifted the back of the car as the front bumper drove into the ground. The doors on either side blew open, and the man and two women, driver included, jumped out, leaving only Alus and the man who'd been stabbed through the back inside.

Having braced for impact, Alus's reaction was delayed.

Some magic must have been used as the car was lifted up the moment the sound of it breaking rang out. The armored car's relatively soft undercarriage was completely exposed as it stood upright. As it was the part where the defense was thinnest, compressed magic was fired at it. The tremendous energy caused an explosion that easily tossed the magic car up, engulfing the area in blinding white light.

Standing on a slightly elevated part of the roadside was a new figure, a man with a hawklike stare. He vigilantly watched the explosion, then quietly poured

strength into his arm again. He held a massive bow in his hands. It had a light glow from the remnants of a recently used magic formula.

“The first arrow was straight on the mark. But just in case,” the man muttered and nocked a second arrow.

His back muscles bulged and his chest rose as the bow creaked when its string was pulled back. The magic formula on the bow’s surface began glowing faintly once more. The string began to quiver as the bow and arrow were imbued with mana.

As the light of mana reached the arrowhead, a complex geometric pattern appeared on the arrow, as did feathers made from magic.

Once he was ready to loose, the air around the man froze... In the next moment, he let go with his fingers. The arrow soared, covered in white light as if it had been set on fire by friction. It was reminiscent of a shooting star. It seemed to be sucked into the undercarriage of the overturned magic car, carving out a huge hole.

A moment later, the edges of the hole seemed to melt when the magic car suddenly exploded into flames. A roar shook the air as black smoke rose from the flames.

Aside from the one who’d lost his life and the target, every one of his allies had fortunately escaped, but the archer himself didn’t care if they lived or not.

“That makes one... How simple,” the man muttered plainly. His magic arrows allowed him to kill from vast distances, so there was no way that he was going to miss from a mere hundred meters.

If he’d had a long-distance viewing spell cast on his eyes, he would have noticed immediately if the target had left the car. However—

“You should have hid your mana until the last moment,” Alus said.

Before the man could even turn around, he felt someone’s hand reach for his chin. He could hear the sickening sound of his own neck twisting and breaking, but only for a moment. As the bones in his neck were forced beyond their range of motion, he let out a last gasp and fell to his knees. The man’s expression of disbelief remained on his face until his death.

“As long as I know that I’m being seen, I can guess what’ll come next. You saved me the trouble of having to look for the archer.”

Alus had thrown up a barrier in preparation for a long-range attack. And in the intense heat and light, Alus had a number of ways to escape any watchful eyes. He couldn’t identify the man who’d died with the anguished look, but since he’d caught him red-handed, Alus didn’t anticipate a problem.

Well, I imagine he’s some hit man from the underworld. It seemed like he had a fair number of kills under his belt, so I wonder if he’s related to those escaped prisoners, Alus thought.

His way of using magic with the bow had been quite ingenious. The formula was similar to Alice’s Sirislate, but the intense heat ray didn’t lose power over distance, seemingly having the power to pierce anything in its line of fire with the same amount of power as from its point of origin. By firing a real arrow with the magic imbued in it, the man had been able to make up for the decay of mana.

“Now then.” Alus cracked his knuckles, looking over the area around the blown-up magic car.

Oh? To think they still haven’t run away. They must be very zealous in their duties, he thought.

Fastening his AWR to his waist again, Alus bent down. The feeling from killing with his bare hands for the first time in a while scraped away at his psyche.

The attackers who had escaped the magic car spread out, still out for Alus’s life. Judging by how the one on the left was nursing an injury to the wrist, Alus knew that must be the short-haired woman. In front of him was the remaining man, and to the right was the long-haired woman.

Lowering his posture, Alus ran like the wind. By the time he’d closed the distance, Alus had already decided on a hunting plan. Night Mist silently slid out of its sheath, attacking the enemies to the left and center. The speed kept the short-haired woman and man in check, as Alus himself pressed close to the long-haired woman, who he’d judged to be the weakest.

It was a fierce assault, mixing in feints by stepping to the left and right. The

woman was only able to react reflexively to his extremely rapid movements, and she lost her balance in the process. She pulled out a thirty-centimeter-long dagger she'd kept hidden and tried to intercept him.

Alus dodged the dagger, and in passing, he put his palm on her elbow. That alone was enough to instantly freeze everything from her elbow and down. The end of her arm, which had turned into an ice sculpture, cracked and fell off.

However, the woman was seemingly unfazed, pulling back her leg and flashing a blade on the heel of her shoe. She spun around, launching a roundhouse kick at Alus's neck. The woman felt the sensation of her blade digging into flesh, and smiled, sure she'd gotten him.

In the next moment, her eyes shot wide open in astonishment. Her blade had run into the neck of her ally, the remaining man.

She felt that was impossible. After all, he'd only just jumped away from Night Mist's preemptive attack some distance away. But the sight in front of her was reality. The man was just as surprised as the woman, unable to voice anything but a groan before gurgling blood and collapsing. Past the man's shoulder, the woman could see Alus in the same place where the man had been, as if they'd traded places.

Now, despite the long-haired woman freezing out of surprise, Alus ignored her to go for the short-haired woman. Even if she tried to warn her last ally, it wouldn't be in time. The short-haired woman had a confused expression on her face as she was grabbed by the head and slammed into the ground with all of her weight behind it. There was a heavy and blunt sound, and the woman lost consciousness and didn't move any more.

"Who the hell is this guy...? I didn't hear about this!" The remaining woman spat out and turned around. She took a step to make her escape at full speed.

However, in the blink of an eye her vision spun as she was knocked to the ground. Before she knew it, there was a chain wrapped around her ankle. Alus pulled on the chain extending from Night Mist, drawing the woman closer. She reached out to the fallen man to resist, but with a pull from Alus she was ripped away from him.

She continued to resist, raising her body and looking directly into the eyes of

the Magicmaster who had been her target. Alus's eyes were devoid of emotion, and they frightened even this woman, who'd killed many people without a care.

Now as she realized her target was a cold and mighty hunter, the fear of him reeling her in made her struggle in panic. She dug into the ground with her nails, but the pull of the chain tore them off. She pulled at the chain, but that wouldn't free her.

Her bloodshot eyes suddenly stopped on the nearby fallen dagger next to the frozen arm. She struggled and reached out with her hand, picking up the weapon. But having lost all reason from fear, she turned it towards her own chained-up ankle rather than at Alus.

Even if she did cut off her own ankle, her situation wouldn't change. She knew that she wouldn't be able to escape from Alus.

Her first stab pierced deep into her ankle, and she screamed out in pain. The second stab was unexpectedly shallow, with only the tip going in. By the third, she could no longer swing down, and she had been pulled all the way over to Alus.

Her long hair was dirty with mud, and she looked miserably up at Alus. Pointing the dagger towards Alus was all she could manage, so she shouldn't have bothered thinking about cutting her leg off in the beginning.

Alus quietly spoke to the woman who was bereft of any reason. "Tsk, what an awful face. Well, I'm not really good at torturing, and even I'd feel daunted tormenting a woman in the middle of the day. You'll have to give up on your arm, but if you want to survive...you know what you have to do, don't you?"

However, the woman shook her head, face pale. Maybe it was a code or resolve, or perhaps she'd already been cornered to the point of being unable to make the decision to have her life spared.

Next, she appeared to open her mouth, but followed by biting down hard. With a gulp, she swallowed something.

Poison?!

At first, Alus thought the woman had chosen to take her life, but the unexpected effects of the drugs became apparent immediately. Her body shook

back and forth in small movements, and blood trickled from the edge of her mouth.

Eventually she swung her long hair up and raised her head to look at Alus. Her pupils were contracted, similar to that of a cat's. It was a change that deserved to be called a mutation.

Next, the blood vessels on the back of her hand swelled. And of all things, she stood up with her injured leg and attacked Alus with frightening strength. Just a moment ago, she had been dispirited and pale. Now her body was overflowing with mana, giving off the air of a wild beast.

It almost seemed like her soul or spirit was running rampant.

Alus pulled on the chain still wrapped around the leg, but rather than being pulled down, she raised her other leg and stomped on the chain. The impact ripped the skin off the leg and Alus heard the sound of her ankle bones breaking. The woman showed no concern for her bleeding ankle, glaring straight at Alus with beastly eyes.

Yet Alus didn't show any particular concern either. She was displaying extraordinary strength, but the chain was still attached, so Alus was ultimately in control of her movements. Her dagger wouldn't reach him.

Alus calmly observed the woman, wondering what he would learn from her.

Suddenly, her head snapped back as if it had bounced off something. There was a small burst of sound, and blood splattered on Alus's cheek and neck. A faint sensation of mana residue drifted in on the wind from far away. Whatever had come flying had gone cleanly through one temple and out the other.

The woman collapsed on the spot, blood pouring from the holes in her head. It was clear to anyone that she'd died instantly.

Alus immediately read the trajectory of the attack and tried to find where it had come from. However, he found it difficult to get a grasp of the sniper's location, so it seemed to have been from very far away. Even so, he squinted and was able to see the faintest hint of a person moving.

So they came from toys as a form of nostalgia, he thought.

Alus suddenly recalled that his class had had a shooting stall for the campus festival that had used air guns that were getting popular in Clevideet. In the modern society where even non-Magicmasters could use everyday magic, guns were a relic of the past. Even the security forces only had a limited number of them. And since they didn't work against Fiends, no first-rate Magicmaster would choose to use one.

Were they worried I was going to get information from this woman? Alus looked down at the long-haired woman with blood and brain matter scattered around her and sighed.

But there was still the short-haired woman he'd slammed into the ground that he could question. As he turned around to secure her—"Sir Alus...!"—his dependable silver-haired partner appeared.

"So it is just as I thought," Loki muttered looking at the scene before her. Her body was covered by a cloak, and in her hand was Ulhava's mask. Alus had asked her to bring it.

"Yeah, just as expected. Seems they were after me," Alus confirmed.

"So are they some of those escaped prisoners?" asked Loki. "Perhaps they suspected you would stand in their way if they tried anything in Alpha."

"It'd be strange for it to be someone related to Kurama after all this time," said Alus. "Moreover, it's just after we spoke with Berwick, so it's probably those escaped prisoners. Unfortunately, I never got her name. Their looks don't match the appearance of anyone we know of either... Still, I don't remember doing anything for them to hold a grudge against me about."

Of course, Alus couldn't remember the details of each and everyone he'd ever dealt with. There was Nox, whom he had a connection to, but she was already dead. But now it made sense that Berwick had told him to hide his face. It seemed he'd become quite well-known in the underworld.

"It's getting really bothersome. Nothing good ever comes from moving without hearing from Lord Vizaist," Alus bitterly complained, reminiscing about the past.

"Don't worry. That's why we have this," Loki said with a smile, holding up the

mask. But that only made Alus more depressed.

“Cut it out, that’s not comforting in any way.”

Pulling himself together, Alus headed for the surviving short-haired woman. Once he reached her, he grabbed her by the collar as if to tell her to wake up. But he didn’t lift her up because the moment he grabbed her, blood from her hair dripped to the ground. This woman had been shot through the head by the mysterious sniper as well.

Alus hadn’t even heard the second shot. They must have fired twice when disposing of the long-haired woman, finishing the other one off as well.

“Tsk, they’re thorough.” Alus clicked his tongue in annoyance, but he had to acknowledge their skill. The long-haired woman was one thing, but accurately hitting the woman on the ground must have been extremely difficult.

Judging by this sniper and the previous archer, it seems they have some skilled people working for them. Their looks don’t match the appearance of anyone at Trojan Prison.

Loki saw Alus’s displeased sour look and called out to him.

“Is something the matter? It was quite a battle, so I’m sure that somebody will come along shortly,” she said.

“I’ve already received an invitation,” Alus said after a moment. “I’m interested in seeing what kind of a force the enemy has, so I think I’ll prod them a little. We’re giving chase.”

“Okay.” Loki answered with resolve and passed the mask to Alus. But instead of putting it on, he put it away. It was in the middle of the day, and unless something happened he’d like to avoid wearing it.

With that, the two of them took off.

The problem at hand was the mysterious sniper, who was still just within Alus’s range of detection. If Alus tried to leave, they pursued. If he tried to close in, they ran. Alus wasn’t a big fan of this game of cat and mouse, so he decided to turn the table and corner this cunning enemy.

Alus and Loki started running, becoming one with the wind. They were faster

than any magic car, but they kept a watchful eye on their surroundings.

“There’s still no contact from Lord Vizaist. We’ll see if we can get them to give themselves away, but we’re not chasing too far, got it?” Alus continued after Loki nodded. “I think you already know, but they’re pretty good. If it comes down to it, don’t hesitate.”

“Understood.” Loki nodded once more with a serious expression.

She could still remember her bitter defeat against the red-haired snow man they had encountered in Vanalis and her inability to do anything against him. She would never repeat that blunder. As Alus had shown when he’d decapitated the snow man, if pressed for it, the ability to make a decision and carry it out was everything. At the same time, she felt like she had seen the face Alus made during his work behind the scenes. The judgment of what was good and evil was unnecessary in a true battle to the death.

But there was something that bothered Loki about that moment of decision that would surely come one day. While pursuing escaped prisoners might not be the time to have this conversation, Loki couldn’t help but ask Alus a question. “Sir Alus. If one of the enemies is cornered and begs for their life, what should I do?”

Alus curtly answered. “If that happens, you will have to believe in yourself. There’s no need for you to do things my way. But typically, the people we’re going to run into are hopeless scum.” He quietly added, eyes still looking forward, “There are extremely few exceptions to that. Some will grovel before you to create an opening.”

It wasn’t so much advice meant for Loki as it was his own experience telling himself.

“Then are there times when you have not killed the enemy?” Loki asked.

“Yeah, there have been some who have surrendered without resisting. What do you think happened to them afterwards?” asked Alus.

“Redeemed by Sir Alus’s mercy, they started living a righteous life?” Loki asked, furrowing her brows.

“No. One guy escaped and killed several pursuers when I took my eyes off of

him. Once I was ordered to eliminate someone I once spared several years before. In the end, they'd gone back to their wicked ways and killed people. In that sense, there's not a single person who started living a righteous life. In the best case, you can just neutralize them."

There was a resigned silence from Alus after that. The rate of recidivism of magic-related crimes was overwhelmingly high. The power to overwhelm others just changed people.

"There's no saving foolishness in particular. We're not gods," he finally said.

"I understand," said Loki.

"Just imagine that all of the targets that come to us via Lord Vizaist are like that."

This was the perfect example. As soon as the escaped convicts had made an attempt on Alus's life, it was clear as day they couldn't just live out their lives peacefully in the Inner World. They were wild beasts that would never get along with society. If left be, their powers would no doubt allow them to leave a mountain of bodies in their wake.

"That aside, it seems this gun user is quite shrewd," said Alus.

Loki had probably noticed as well: Despite sensing Alus's pursuit, they showed no signs of shooting back in panic or stopping to fight. Moreover, they were faster than Alus had anticipated, as it seemed like he would be unable to catch up even when running at full speed.

Alus had given chase to put an end to the cat-and-mouse game, but it seemed the other party didn't care, which meant only the speed of the game would change. The chase continued for ten, twenty minutes and longer. The shooter maintained their distance while continuing moving as if luring Alus and Loki in.

"This is getting us nowhere," said Alus.

"What should we do? Should I drown them in my mana sonar to sort of pressure them?" asked Loki.

"No, it might be effective against Fiends, but against someone of this caliber it might work against us. They could read and remember your mana and use it

against us.”

Meanwhile, Alus’s field of view ability had no danger of being detected. It wasn’t as accurate as Loki’s, but its properties were well suited for this situation.

The sky gradually began to change from a beautiful blue to a dusky twilight color. At this time of year, it didn’t take long for night to set.

The chase continued for a while longer, and eventually they had left the middle district. Their surroundings had changed quite dramatically. They were now in a remote area, far from any city, where there were no signs of people. Alus looked like he was about to lose his temper when something finally happened.

Alus and Loki both suddenly checked ahead of them. Something suddenly came flying at high speeds, aimed between the two of them. Alus immediately recognized that it was a magic bullet being camouflaged and concealed by a weak mana, and he told Loki as much.

Alus and Loki jumped to the left and right to dodge it, but of all things, the bullet came to a stop between them. It was an impossible feat for a normal bullet.

The bullet froze in the air and began rotating before it burst. A strange wave of mana spread over 300 meters, washing over Alus and Loki as well, before dispersing and disappearing.

“It wasn’t an attack. They spread out a special barrier through the mana. That said, I can’t tell what the purpose was,” said Alus.

When fighting Rayleigh, he had used an anti-magic barrier, but this seemed to function on a different principle. But because it wasn’t as powerful, it covered a large range.

Suddenly realizing something, Alus pulled out his license and tried using it. “As I thought, it doesn’t work.”

The barrier was creating a disturbance that interfered with the circuitry of magical devices. And since it was disrupting information, including the mana in the air, it was affecting Alus’s field of view as well.

“I see, so rather than nullifying magic, it uses the transformative effect of mana. It completely destroys detection magic, so it’s surprisingly troublesome. To think that Millimore Mazain would be made practical,” said Alus.

Several kinds of spells to nullify magic had been researched as a way to fight against it. That, of course, included the method Alus occasionally used of interfering with the magic formula directly and preventing it from manifesting, which was a rather forceful method and often only worked on those below him.

In comparison, Millimore Mazain wasn’t a legitimate spell that used a magic formula but rather used the more heretical approach of using the transformative effect of mana. But because it worked on such a special theory, not even Alus had managed to make it practical yet, so if the enemy had made the theory practical and realized it with the magic bullet, then they had surpassed Alus in that respect.

And that meant this was truly someone they couldn’t let their guard down around. Even if the enemy didn’t know about Alus’s field of view, they had still figured out that he and Loki were using some sort of detection method, and they’d used the bullet to conceal themselves.

Still, Alus and Loki couldn’t figure out the reason they had chosen to hide after all this time. Then, several more dome-shaped barriers spread out before Alus and Loki, causing them to furrow their brow.

“Not again! This time it’s...ten, no...almost twenty?!” Loki exclaimed, looking pale.

“We’re going to completely lose them at this rate. This’ll be a little forceful, but we need to eliminate this guy right now,” said Alus.

Since it wasn’t a direct attack using magic, it was harder to deal with, thought Alus.

If the spell was used against the military headquarters, it would shut down all systems. The headquarters, of course, had means in place to prevent interference, but against this unexpected method and these numbers, the defense was far from perfect. It would definitely have some impact. It would be too big of a blow against the military, whose first priority was to protect the nation from the threats of the Outer World.

Having decided to not pursue but to eliminate the enemy without fail, Alus racked his brain. *I guess it decided to not pursue*, thought Alus.

Blending in with the darkness, Alus put on his mask, and Loki pulled a hood over her head and face. As they rapidly accelerated, Alus told Loki the plan: He only needed to locate and stop the enemy for a moment. In that moment, Loki would use Force to take off and cut the enemy off.

Alus ran between the trees. Before long, a wide-open area stretched out beyond him. As soon as he was in a place where he could see, he would take off.

A flash of light burst around him as he poured mana into the chain in his right hand. Just before the swelling mana began to construct a magic formula, he left the trees and his view opened up. He saw it...

“A trap! Just as I thought!”

A suspicious group had somehow appeared next to Alus. Because of the interfering barriers, the encounter had come as a surprise, even to Alus. Like him, the group members were covering their bodies in cloaks.

In the spur of the moment, Alus slashed Night Mist at the front of the rapidly approaching group. Sensing his intent, the front of the group countered. They rapidly closed in on him, as though they had planned it all out ahead of time.

There was a heavy metallic sound, and sparks flew; their weapons repelled each other. Alus and the opponent pushed each other away.

Looking at his opponents, Alus found them surprisingly few. The mysterious group of six slowed down and assumed a triangle formation with the small figure making up the front point.

More escaped prisoners? Alus strained his eyes in the dim light.

The delicate chin of the small figure peeked out beneath the hood of their cloak. Now that they had slowed down, their wisteria-colored hair tied on either side had swayed to the sides. And in their hand was...

An umbrella? Is that what they used to repel Night Mist, Alus wondered. The response and texture suggested that it was an AWR, but what a strange choice

for a weapon.

“Tsk, it’s not even the gun user. I don’t have the time to deal with small fry, but—”

Before Alus could finish, the small figure stamped their foot and leaped forward, closing in on Alus in an instant and swinging down their umbrella without hesitation. Alus dodged, but realized he’d have to stay on guard, whether he liked it or not, when he saw the ground burst open. The umbrella looked frail, but there was no doubt tremendous mana behind it.

Counterattacking without a moment’s reprieve, Alus pulled on the chain and formed a mana blade, further infusing it with Lightning Blade. He slashed sideways without emotion, but it was repelled by the spinning umbrella. Even the follow-up lightning was swept away, scattering and disappearing into the surrounding area.

So they can repel spells with just mana, he thought. It was a brute-force move that Alus used from time to time as well, but it couldn’t be done without quite a lot of mana.

Sensing that, Alus threw Night Mist and deployed Oboro Hien overhead. In an instant, dozens of mana blades modeled after Night Mist were fired. As the opponent dodged Night Mist with a backflip, Oboro Hien rained down to finish them off.

After quickly removing its clasp, they opened the umbrella. A powerful barrier was deployed, blocking the Oboro Hien. A great many blades crashed against the barrier, making it sound like rain was pouring down.

A few seconds later, the surrounding area was silent once again, and from what Alus could see, the opponent was unharmed. They stood with a fearless posture.

“Oh? Interesting,” Alus said, mana pouring out of his body. The amount and intensity could fill up the forest. It was enough that just glancing at it would leave a typical Magicmaster shocked.

Seeing Alus like that, Loki no longer intended to hinder him, deciding to leave it up to him. Meanwhile, the small figure raised a hand to stop their five allies,

whose bloodlust showed plainly. Then as if to compete with him, the small figure let out a vast amount of mana too. Like Alus, it was an aberrant amount of mana.

The gust of wind created by that made the figure's cloak flutter, exposing the wisteria-colored hair tied on either side.

A woman? And her cloak fluttering...? Alus was surprised.

Sensing that the interfering barrier had weakened from his own and the opponent's mana, Alus whispered to his partner, "Loki, now! Use your detection to cast a net."

"Okay." Loki immediately replied and used her mana sonar in an attempt to mark the escaping shooter. However, it was all for naught. Something interfered with her mana and sealed it before she could fully unleash it.

Alus said nothing, but he moved his eyes from the girl with the umbrella to a tall, slender figure holding a finger up to their lips. Based on their glossy lips, white slender fingers, and rich curves visible even through their cloak, it all suggested that she was a woman.

So she can interfere with the normally unrecognizable realm of mana, she's a pain in the ass too...huh?! thought Alus.

By the time he realized he'd lost the initiative, there were three layers of translucent rings around him. As the woman with the umbrella poured mana into it, the restraining rings closed in. It was no doubt restraining magic, but it seemed to be based on barrier magic.

However, Alus didn't panic as he lightly slashed Night Mist at the rings. If he assumed that it was the same barrier that blocked Oboro Hien, he could estimate its strength. The blade of his sword formed a different blade from the previous mana blade. It cut through the target, space and all.

Space was displaced by his Dimension Thrust, and the remains of the three rings were extinguished as space repaired itself. But he'd only bought himself a moment's reprieve. As soon as the rings were gone, a rectangular barrier appeared and surrounded Alus, as if to box him in.

It was likely the girl with the umbrella again. Next, the box-formed barrier

began to shrink. She was probably not just trying to restrain him but to also use the air compressed by the barrier. Who knew how far a human being could be compressed, but at the very least once it proceeded past a certain point, there wouldn't be remnants of flesh nor blood, let alone their original shape.

Alus's eyes beneath his mask turned darker. As they lost their light, Alus's thoughts became more levelheaded, and eventually his brain fully entered combat mode.

It was like even his blood was cooling down.

«*Memeriant Orga*» Alus quietly spoke the name.

Suddenly, three massive black horns sprouted out from the ground by the feet of the girl with the umbrella. Memeriant Orga, also called "the devil's horns," was said to have a hardness that surpassed anything that existed. They had a dark luster, as if they were made from compressing all minerals found underground, and the three fang-like black horns attacked the girl with the umbrella. In a moment, she spun that umbrella, folding it and transforming it into a blunt weapon, which she used against the horns. However, the umbrella was only able to block it for a moment as she was unable to kill the momentum.

Alus bent his fingers, and the three black horns twisted their points, spiraling up towards the girl with the umbrella. As she once again blocked with her umbrella, the small girl was lifted and blown upward.

The more she blocked it, the further up she was blown. She wanted to try to alter their trajectory, but the horns didn't give her a chance.

Sensing her disadvantage, she poured mana into her umbrella to resist with all her might. She built another box-shaped barrier. The three horns, now blocked by the box-shaped carrier, couldn't be destroyed, but their rotation could be stopped.

Having slowed down the black horns enough allowed her to escape. She opened her umbrella and slowly fell towards the ground, together with the mana remnants of her shattered barrier. Her cloak and skirt fluttered in the air. Simultaneously, her eyes turned sharp and she shouted.

"What's with this magic?! I can't believe it's transforming here!" the girl spat

out as she changed the way she held her umbrella.

By that time, Memeriant Orga had transformed from three black horns into the same number of thick ice tentacles. They were covered in thorns like they were tendrils of a massive rose.

The spell had transformed from its earth attribute to its ice attribute... Changing a spell of this level after manifestation required an unbelievable amount of technique, and the girl's agitated expression said it all.

The air froze as the thorns of ice closed in on the girl. They could move more flexibly than the black horns. But when the girl saw them, she thrust the tip of her umbrella at them, and the tentacles became encased by a solid barrier and noisily shattered.

The girl with the umbrella, Clevideet's Single Digit Magicmaster Fanon Trooper, was unable to hide the irritation she felt. Gordon and Suzar were strong, but this person was on a different level. She'd never expected to face an enemy this skilled.

If she brought her subordinates into this fight, they'd be killed. All five of them would die just to create an opening. And that was something she couldn't permit, so she would need to endure on her own.

She'd been chasing after Gordon and Suzar with perfect preparations, but now she'd fallen into a trap. Moreover, the opponent was controlling the flow of the battle. He was certainly very skilled at fighting people. If not, she wouldn't have so easily been put in a disadvantage.

However, Fanon's specialty was eradicating Fiends and defensive battles. A sudden encounter fighting against a fellow human was out of her area of expertise. But as a Single, she couldn't afford to back down. And with the life of her subordinates in her hands, she was driven by a need to take down this formidable foe.

Fanon ground her teeth as the chilly air reformed the ice thorns. They once again reached out towards her, but Fanon crushed them again and she allowed herself to fall. She glared at the opponent below her.

A tempest of wind blew up from below, but Fanon didn't so much as blink as

she fixed her stare at one point.

Glimpses of the combat uniform beneath her cloak could be seen, and she showed no care that the bandage on her forehead was falling off as she let her emotions out.

“Don’t underestimate me!” she shouted, pointing the tip of her umbrella at the masked man.

A small ball formed that immediately expanded into a massive sphere. Inside the huge sphere-shaped barrier was a sharp, rotating blade. Nothing but blood would remain of a human caught up in that giant blender.

«*Juggernaut*»

Just as she finished casting that spell, an unexpected figure appeared in her sight: the woman who could move fastest among the subordinates she’d brought with her. While Fanon’s attention was on the masked man, the subordinate seemed to have gone after his follower.

Perhaps it was lack of experience, but it was a terrible move. She didn’t have a good read on the enemy’s capabilities. And Fanon couldn’t imagine the masked man would overlook such a thing.

Or perhaps she’d read the situation and was staking her body to create an opportunity for Fanon to counterattack.

Ah, why are they always like this! she grumbled in her mind.

Fanon released her mana before even reaching the ground. She placed a huge barrier in front of the masked man to block his sight and turned her attention to the man’s partner, a hooded figure watching the battle.

They certainly seemed to be easier to deal with than the masked man. So in that sense, her subordinate’s actions were correct. After all, nothing would change unless they could break the current deadlock.

Fanon glanced at Exceles, the best Spotter in the world, and her face said it all. They were already in unfamiliar territory, with political restrictions placed on them. But with the strange interfering barriers and unexpected ambush, they were at a clear disadvantage.

Fanon considered taking the smaller figure hostage and using them as a bargaining chip. Capturing them would at least limit the enemy's options, and the enemy might move to protect his partner, so it wasn't a bad idea when it came to creating an opening.

With that in mind, Fanon watched uneasily as the masked man dealt with the barrier blocking his sight and her female subordinate approached the smaller enemy.

It was a reckless move, but she had reached the same conclusion as Fanon, so she moved to restrain the smaller enemy. Seizing the initiative, the woman deftly moved around her and grabbed her wrist, but in the next moment a small flash of lightning flickered before her eyes.

The small figure disappeared, even though she thought that she had grabbed their wrist, and in the next moment, the subordinate felt a tremendous impact on the left side of her head. She had underestimated the small opponent, who'd moved at super high speeds using an explosive acceleration, far exceeding the subordinate's perception to move behind her and unleash a powerful kick.

She blocked it with her left arm, but was blown away. She recovered midair and tried to keep her balance by thrusting her feet into the ground. Even so, she couldn't fully stop her momentum and was about to fall over when Exceles supported her back with a hand.

"Thank you very much. I-I let my guard down."

She felt like the bones in her arm had been fractured when she'd used it to block the kick. The only reason it hadn't been worse was because she was one of Fanon's strongest subordinates. But she'd been careless, and now she could no longer afford to make another move. Her opponent had stopped attacking and taken a defensive stance.

"Talk about reckless. In the end, you ended up getting in Lady Fanon's way!" Exceles complained, then suddenly looked behind her.



The masked man had dealt with the barrier blocking his sight, with ease as expected, but as soon as he did, Fanon used her expert-level spell, Juggernaut. The rapidly spinning sphere was hard to counter with just magic as the blade had been turned into a hard barrier. It closely resembled some wind-attribute spells, but it was Fanon's original arrangement of barrier magic, making it far more durable.

In other words, it possessed properties that made it superior to any magical countermeasures.

Despite knowing that, Exceles couldn't help but feel a chill run down her spine. She could see everything it touched ground up and crushed into material finer than sand. The masked man was also covered up, but...

"Exceles!" Fanon's angry voice came from above. The dismantled umbrella cloth and frame pierced the ground in front of Exceles. Only the handle and shaft remained in Fanon's hand.

The moment she realized that, Exceles understood Fanon's intentions.

Who could have expected that they would be using the spare parts they'd brought with them so soon. But Exceles understood the necessity. At this moment, it was kill or be killed.

The next moment, the chill that Exceles had felt was justified. The Juggernaut sphere let out a howl as the masked man pierced the sphere from all directions with countless thin stakes extended from the air.

The sound of the spinning blade changed to a crushing sound, as if the blade had been caught by something incredibly hard. And then...

Preposterous.

Impossible.

The squad members turned pale at the scene, their thoughts left unexpressed. Juggernaut was an advanced application of barrier magic that only Fanon could use, yet its spinning had come to a complete stop because of all of the stakes piercing it. They wondered just how hard the stakes were to accomplish that.

Among the cowering squad members, only Exceles remained calm, a frown on her beautiful face. She accepted what was happening before her and gently touched her waist.

“Give me Aegis!” Fanon exclaimed.

“Okay!” responded Exceles. She had expected Fanon to say as much and moved smoothly, unclasping a large cylinder from her waist and holding it out. She then suddenly kicked it up. The replacement AWR flew right to Fanon with tremendous speed.

As an expert of defensive battles capable of defending against both magical and physical attacks, Fanon could raise barriers and protective walls. In other nations, she was called untouchable, but in reality, the Magicmasters in Clevideet had a slightly different perception of her. In a sense, it was the complete opposite of the other nations.

In Clevideet, they respectfully referred to Fanon Trooper as the Greatest Contradiction, and they called her three AWRs the Three Precept Contradiction. The AWRs were overwhelmingly powerful, and unleashing their full capabilities was not allowed without the ruler’s or head of the military’s permission. Aegis, which Fanon had just received, was one of those AWRs, and she was only allowed to use it with Exceles’s permission.

After confirming it had reached Fanon, Exceles realized why Fanon had wanted Aegis in that moment. The night sky was dark, and in it, she could see a large undulation like a snake, as swirling black clouds seemed to hang overhead and cover everything.

After Juggernaut disappeared, Fanon finally landed in front of her squad and hurriedly used the replacement AWR to cast Aegis System.

As if laughing at her efforts, the masked man—who had easily dealt with Fanon’s Juggernaut spell—pointed the tip of his short sword into the sky, its chains dancing around him. His lips quietly spoke a name.

‹‹*Black Ikazuchi*››

“Okay, stop right there,” a woman said, appearing out of nowhere. She clapped her hands, stopping the masked man.

She stood between the masked man and Fanon, then walked forward with elegant steps. She adorably tilted her head and briefly asked, “So...what is going on here?”

With the appearance of this unexpected visitor, Alus canceled Black Ikazuchi and Fanon lowered her umbrella. The mere appearance of the woman was enough to end the battle and ease the tension. It would be fair to say that her very existence determined the course of a battle that could have twisted the future of both Alpha and Clevideet.

“Feli,” Alus looked at her and said.

“Uhm...Ms. Felinella, what is the meaning of this?!” Exceles asked, removing her hood and revealing her blond hair, her expression perplexed.

“Eh, Felinella?! That’s her all right, but what’s going on?!” asked Fanon.

Exceles glanced at Fanon to gently rebuke her, but she looked just as confused. But she also felt relieved. After all, the battle was a completely extraordinary situation that had started out of the blue—an unexpected encounter between two Singles was truly unfortunate for both nations.

“Ms. Exceles, I don’t fully understand the situation either... For starters, Mr. Alus, could you please remove the mask for a moment?”

At Felinella’s urging, Alus slowly began to understand what was happening and nonchalantly removed his mask. Likewise, Loki lowered her hood. He let out a soft breath and tried to tell himself that at least there hadn’t been any unfortunate accidents. Of course, the other party had made the first move.

Alus and Loki, Exceles and Fanon...after glancing at their faces, Felinella cleared her throat. “Uhm...I believe introductions are in order. This here is Sir Alus Reigin and his partner, Ms. Loki,” she said to Fanon and Exceles before turning around to face Alus.

“And, Mr. Alus, this is Clevideet’s Single Digit Magicmaster, Lady Fanon Trooper, and part of her squad. We are working together with them for this incident.”

Fanon’s squad members reacted with a comical twitch of their cheeks; Fanon alone glared at Alus.

“Alpha’s Single Digit Magicmaster, the rank 1...” Exceles put into words what the silent Fanon was thinking.

He was above even Fanon. The rank 1. The person who stood at the top of all Magicmasters. As far as Exceles knew, he was an enigmatic Magicmaster whose identity had been kept hidden all this time. However, Exceles recalled hearing that the rank 1 had appeared during the ruler’s conference as Cicelnia’s bodyguard. So that naturally meant that one among them should know what the rank 1 looked like.

“Lady Fanon...did you realize?” Exceles asked.

“How am I supposed to know who a guy wearing a weird mask is?” Fanon asked.

She did have a point. It would be impossible to match the appearance of someone she had only met once with the masked man before her. That said, the two had just been in a deadly struggle, and there was a part that didn’t make sense to Exceles.

Alus kept quiet, and Fanon looked like she wanted to say something. That was when Felinella intervened with a bright smile, making a suggestion to smooth things over. “For starters, why don’t we change location?”

Her smile was a bit forced, but at least the situation was under control. Exceles looked back up to the sky where the eerie black clouds had been. However, they had already disappeared, replaced with the familiar artificial night sky.

Alus Reigin had surely been seriously trying to kill them. The black clouds had been an omen of a powerful spell, and she doubted that Fanon would have been able to activate Aegis System in time. With her sharp intuition, Exceles had felt death coming for her. She couldn’t shake away the feeling of an ominous ending.

Fortunately, they had avoided the worst outcome.

Relieved that her life had been saved by Felinella’s appearance, Exceles took a deep breath to forcibly calm down. With that, the sudden close encounter between Singles ended, and in effect, a minor military conflict came to a

peaceful conclusion.



Afterword

Hello, Izushiro here.

Thank you very much for purchasing volume 14 of *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*. There's no time to take a breather between this volume and the previous one. I'd love to dig a little deeper, but I will save that for the next volume.

Getting right to it, I would like to give a word of thanks to everyone who has helped me.

Thank you to my editor-in-charge for our meetings (despite there being almost no opportunity to meet face-to-face in this day and age).

This time it was the conversation between Alus and Lilisha that was the very emotional scene I had to read over and over. Personally, I think it's closer to sensory writing rather than calculated writing. When I read it back after finishing writing, it feels like I am reading it from the same perspective as everyone else.

Next, I would like to give a special thanks to everyone involved with the publishing, printing, and distribution. And thank you very much to Miyuki Ruria for their wonderful illustrations. The Single Digit Magicmasters are all being drawn little by little, and we've finally gotten to Fanon, although she already made her appearance on the cover for volume 13.

Of course, there's a beautiful Fanon on this volume's cover as well! That being said, she is one of the characters I have been hoping to see illustrated since I started writing, so I am very attached to her. I am still driven by an urge to write all sorts of episodes about her...and I hope I one day get the chance!

With the help of many people, this book has been published physically and digitally. And thank you very much to the readers for making this possible. I hope for your continued support for *The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan*.

Please return to see how the escaped prisoners arc plays out and what Alus will do next time! I will do my best to get the next volume into your hands as soon as possible!

THE GREATEST MAGICMASTER'S

RETIREMENT PLAN

14





Fanon Trooper

A Single Digit Magicmaster from Clevidest who uses an umbrella-type AWR and barrier magic. She makes her move after a major incident in her nation, but what happens next...?

Dante

A mysterious escaped prisoner who appears to have a massive ambition and vast powers.

Alus Reigin

The current rank 1, the Greatest Magicmaster, but at the moment a student of the Second Magical Institute. He comes face to face with Fanon for the first time since the ruler's conference.



Bonus Short Story

Small Bud

It was something that happened after completing a mission and returning to the military headquarters.

In Clevideet, the rooms given to Singles were nothing short of magnificent. This room was no exception, a room made just for Fanon Trooper in a corner of their headquarters, which she used separately from her own house. Not even the Governor-General's room was as big.

The interior had been completely renovated, boasting the comfort of a luxury hotel. She also had a separate standby room for her squad, complete with rooms for changing and meetings. Members of her squad could apply for individual rooms, which they would most likely get, or choose to live in the military dorms. However, there were few in all of Clevideet, or even all seven nations, who received the same level of treatment as Fanon.

After leaving her squad, Fanon was headed for her magnificent room. When she arrived, she opened the heavy double doors, and the first thing to catch her eye was a long, soft carpet and the white furniture. It wasn't quite to Fanon's taste, but it wasn't hard to imagine that a lot of government funds had been thrown at the room. There were even housemaids standing by the front door.

Fanon bade them stay there and entered the room alone. They had been hired to care for her by cleaning the room or helping her change clothes, but Fanon had never actually allowed them to help her.

Exceles, who'd been a little late, showed up after her. She gave the maids a light bow and entered the room before the doors could fully close.

"Lady Fanon, please cheer up. It isn't like this hasn't happened before," Exceles said, her exasperation aimed at Fanon, who was currently quite worked up.

But she received no answer. Fanon wordlessly but violently began to take off her clothes, to which Exceles sighed and closed the door behind her. Fanon paid no heed to her second-in-command as she took off one piece after another. When she reached her underwear, her hands stopped for a moment...

She glanced over at Exceles for a moment before slightly turning her back to the woman before taking her underwear off. There was a light sound as the pads inside fell to the floor. Fanon didn't so much as look at them as she headed straight for the shower room.

Exceles sighed as she picked up the scattered clothes before finally chasing after the pads that had rolled away.

Only two today. I thought she was being modest. Still, I can't believe how many layered pads I have seen... Lady Fanon sure does make an effort, she thought.

Fanon changed the size of her bust depending on her mood for the day. Incidentally, Exceles didn't think two was a bad number. After all, Fanon tended to put on more pads the worse her mood swung and the more insecure she got. So the worse her mood was, the bigger her chest swelled.

Exceles could only hope that Fanon could get over her complex. But it was difficult for her to help since they'd been together for so long. No matter how many times she said that it wasn't good to pad too much, it didn't dispel Fanon's feelings of inferiority.

In that sense, today was a good day. Two was a relatively composed number. It meant that she was in a relaxed state of mind.

"Getting a mission upon returning is something that happens. Yet getting angry and stomping out before even hearing the details... She can be so childish at times..." she said the last bit in a quiet voice so that nobody could hear, even though Fanon was in the shower.

The fact that Exceles always had to convince Fanon didn't quite sit right with her. That said, they had a unique relationship that exceeded their military positions; she was the only one who Fanon could reveal her complex to.

Incidentally, when Exceles picked up her underwear, she found the size to be

unnecessarily large. Frankly, it was the same size as hers. Maybe it was vanity, but Exceles almost felt a form of admiration...

Of course, once she found it a little cute, she was unable to be as strict. As she pondered what to do, Fanon turned off the shower and came out with a towel wrapped around her. With no more time to think, Exceles gave up and apologized in her mind.

“Ah?! Lady Fanon, did you get a little bigger?” Exceles couldn’t tell if she was feigning surprise very well...but it was probably fine.

She felt ashamed that she had become accustomed to this kind of acting. She’d lost count of how many times she’d wished they’d actually grow. If only Fanon’s breasts could acknowledge their owner’s efforts...

The girl’s response was just as expected. “R-Really?!”

Exceles had never known such joy. Her captain’s smile and sparkling eyes were so carefree and innocent. *I’m sorry Lady Fanon*, thought Exceles.

“Y-Yes, of course.” Exceles awkwardly looked away, but she couldn’t overlook this chance; she pressed the point while Fanon was in high spirits. She shook the pads between her fingers, and said, “But you can’t let your guard down yet, Lady Fanon. Why not reduce the number of pads? How about a single, thicker pad? As things are going now, it might impede your growth... No matter how many seeds you plant, they won’t sprout if you put a lid on top.”

Exceles knew it was a terrible example, but figured you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. Fanon furrowed her brow, then looked down at her body and nodded like she’d received some golden advice.

With her captain’s mood restored, Exceles moved on to the main topic. “Then let us get back to our mission, shall we?”

“I don’t want to.”

“...Ah, I understand.”

It had been a clear refusal. Whenever Fanon was like that, she wouldn’t budge. But that didn’t mean Exceles could reveal that Fanon’s “growth” was a lie.

In the end, Exceles had spread the sinful seeds of deceit in the soil of her captain's innocent heart, when all she had wanted was a small bud.

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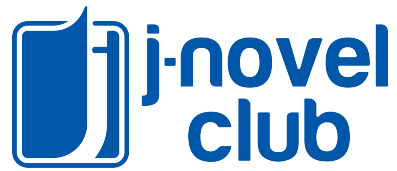
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The Greatest Magicmaster's Retirement Plan: Volume 14

by Izushiro

Translated by Warnis Edited by Heidi Ward

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2022

Premium E-Book